

When the Black Kids Moved In:  
Racial Reproduction and the Promise of Intergroup Dialogue in an  
Exurban High School

by

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To the black women who raised me:

my grandma, Margarette Louise McWilliams Sallee, who graduated valedictorian  
of her class in 1946 at the age of 16;

my nana, Geneva Estella Brown Griffin, who graduated from  
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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Introduction: Rethinking Race and Reform in Schools**

#### **I. THE FIGHT: ON THE GROUND WITH RACE**

On January 12, 2010 at 3PM, I stood in front of nineteen 11<sup>th</sup> grade students from diverse racial, economic, religious and political backgrounds in Ms. Bogle's classroom at Jefferson High School (JHS). The students were standing in a straight line from one end of the room to the other, shoulders touching, silent, with serious expressions on their faces. Earlier that day, Naomi, my co-facilitator, Cathi, our social work intern, and I had moved the desks into the corners to clear a large space for the students. I read the next prompt aloud:

Cross the line if you have ever been discriminated against or made fun of, due to your racial identity, by someone from a different racial or ethnic background.

After I read all of the prompts, we split into two small groups. For an hour students talked about their experiences with race in their school. White students admitted to having racist family members. Black students admitted their ambivalence at hearing the N-word come from the mouths of their white peers. Some said that the best way to overcome racism was to ignore it. Others realized for the first time that the racial jokes that permeated the hallways of their school were almost always targeted at students of color. At the end of the hour students packed up to leave, smiling, laughing, thinking deeply, and asking what we would be talking about next week. Unbeknownst to them, and me, they were walking out of the week's session into a racial conflict in which everything they had just discussed was made all too real.

The story goes like this: A group of 9<sup>th</sup> grade African American boys were standing outside the main entrance of Jefferson High School around 4:30PM. Although school had let out almost two hours before, students—especially black students—often stayed in the building, gathered at the front doors, waiting for rides well into the evening. Located between cornfields, two-lane country roads, and newly constructed subdivisions,

Jefferson did not provide students with after school transportation, nor did the public transit system come far enough into the exurbs to be of service to them. While they waited, students laughed, joked, and played around.

On this day, Cho, an Asian male student who had only been in the United States for a few years, walked past the group. Although Cho's English was not particularly good, he was a fairly popular student who had managed to make a diverse group of friends. He regularly hung out with both black and white male students—some who were troublemakers, others who were not. However, the young men he walked by on January 12th were not his friends. With seemingly little provocation, they began hurling racial slurs at him, calling Cho a “flat faced bitch” among other things. As the black students continued to harass him, Cho became more and more upset and defensive. In retaliation he called them “niggers.” Enraged, the black students began posturing, threatening to beat him up for daring to call them the N-word. Blake, Cho's white male friend who had a reputation for getting into fights, came to his defense. More racial slurs were spewed, as were punches. In broad daylight, with parents parked in cars to pick up their children and Intergroup students fresh out of a race dialogue as witnesses, black, Asian, and white students engaged in a fight so severe that the police were called.

The day after the fight the school was in an uproar. Students, teachers, and administrators had all heard about the incident, but were talking about it in very different ways. In the hallways, students gossiped about who had hit whom, who had said what, and why—using racialized language to explain the incident. Concerned that this event could turn into an ongoing altercation, the administration quickly implemented a series of punitive measures to “control” the school, but insisted that race had nothing to do with the incident. Teachers had heard only snippets of the fight and were largely blind to what was going on. They said little about it to each other or to their students. It was clear that at Jefferson, students, teachers and administrators were making sense of race in very different and often contradictory ways. It was also clear that because adults had largely failed to address race, students were interacting in ways that reproduced problematic race relations.

## A. Students' Perspectives

At the Intergroup meeting the following week the students discussed the incident:

*Victoria (black female)*: I was there afterschool, talking to Blake, with Jasmine. Cho was looking at one of the black guys and he looked at them wrong. It dropped from there. But then the boys were talking stuff.

*Kwesi (black male)*: This guy, Cho, they were making fun of him and he said the N-word to them. He was scared and didn't want to fight, but his friend Blake said he wasn't afraid to fight....Blake started taking off his jacket and then someone hit him. And a whole bunch of people jumped in. It moved outside.

*Willie (black male)*: Cho hangs out with a lot of black people and he uses the N-word, 'cause ten or fifteen of his friends think it's okay.

*Victoria*: They left, but then they came back in, and the bench me and Jasmine were on was the bench they rolled over and my purse got stuck, and it was like Blake on the ground and five people jumped in, and then it went outside.

*Kwesi*: It was one-on-one and then random people jumped in. It was like 15 people fighting.

*Victoria*: And no teacher was there, and parents had to break it up! My mom!

*Matt (white male)*: I drove by and parents were watching. There were at least three cars of parents.

*Raymond (black male)*: What do you expect parents to do? They don't know about their own safety. It takes a brave person to really step in.

*Willie*: For the record, Blake did not have a knife and that's what everyone was saying, that the white boy had a knife.

*Group*: Yes, they did!

*Willie*: They did when they came back up to the school. When he came back up to the school he came with a couple of them, with about 6 or 10 of them in a white van—every one of them had knives. But the people in the fight weren't there anymore.

*Leah (white female)*: I saw Blake being taken out in handcuffs. And people were saying he should be freed—that it was unfair.

*Kwesi*: Somebody jumped in cause that was his cousin, somebody else jumped in 'cause it was their friend. It's pointless. Blake did hit the [black boy] first.

*Naomi (white female, program facilitator):* Is that what you saw or what you heard?

*Kwesi:* What I heard.

*Willie:* Yeah, that is not what happened. A lot of the dudes that jumped in, they came back to the school the next day and didn't get suspended. And they were like, "He can't use the N-word! I got my licks in!"

*Raymond:* It had everything to do with who's allowed to say the N-word. Cho's not from this culture. He has only been here two years and didn't know the context of the word. So when he said that he didn't think it would be that big of a deal. And so the other people felt he made them look stupid, so they wanted to make him belittled. That was the only reason for the fight. When Cho uses it with his friends they say he doesn't know any better.

*Curtis (white male):* They were making fun of his ethnicity.

*Madison (white female):* They called him Asian Rust?

*Kwesi:* I talked to him. He said they were making racial comments and he called them the N-word in response.

*Raymond:* Cho wasn't the initiator. They say he was 'cause he looked at them funny. It's all thought and assumptions. Then they said, "You wanna be Asian!" and Cho took great offense to it when he said, "Shut up you black Niggers."

*Kwesi:* If it wasn't for them making racial comments about Cho this never would have happened. They could have just said, "What you looking at?" They didn't have to make an Asian comment—that was totally unnecessary. Cho used the word wrong, but if they hadn't made the Asian comment, he wouldn't have said the N-word.

*Raymond:* This links back to what I said last week. If you have an intent to hurt in the heat of the moment, it will be hurtful. But if they had just said it was a joke, it would have been okay.

*Madison:* It all comes back to who's allowed to say it and who's not. Either the N-word or other slurs.

*Nathan (Asian and white male):* Bottom line. If you're not black you shouldn't say the N-word. And even 90% of black people who use it don't even know what they're saying, 'cause they say it like, "What's up." It's only when someone else says it to you that you feel what it means. So I think no one should use it or Yellow Asian.

*Willie:* I agree with Nathan—no one should use racial slurs. Because when someone says one to you, you want to say it back to them to hurt them as much as they hurt you.

*Gabrielle (white female):* I just want to know where the people were who are supposed to protect us? I think maybe they were taught that way, if someone hurts you, hurt them back.

In a facilitated, racially integrated setting, these students were able to discuss the fight, which many of them had personally witnessed, and engage productively with the racial implications of the event. They talked about the politics of racial slurs, the usage of the N-word, and the ways in which cultural misunderstandings and discrimination can lead to physical altercations. Moreover, they expressed their frustration at the failure of adults—teachers and parents—to protect them, both physically and psychologically and to teach them how to deal with racial discrimination and bullying. In the end, they concluded that bullying and violence could not be disconnected from racial tensions between students.

The day following the fight, a number of students were taken to In-School Suspension (ISS)—some of whom had been misidentified. Cameron, a black male was taken to ISS because he had the same name as a white student who had been involved. He was so nervous that when I went into the ISS room I heard him say, “I might die today!” Another student agreed and said that the white boys were probably going to try to beat the black boys with bats. He told the black Cameron to “watch his back.” The next day the mistake had been realized and the white Cameron who had been involved in the fight was sitting in ISS. He repeatedly claimed his innocence: “See, I was trying to break up the fight and now they’re trying to kill me. They have me here in ISS for my own protection.”

In many ways the confusion about which boy had been involved in the fight—the white one or the black one—was an ironic commentary on the incident on a whole. It was clear to the students who witnessed the event that the fight had been provoked by notions of racial dominance and disagreements about who was allowed to use racial slurs and how. Individuals jumped in to defend those they perceived to be a part of their racial group. However, the responses of adults in the building to this incident had none of the qualities. Instead, they glossed over the racial dynamics of the fight and chose to respond in ways that were punitive.

## **B. Administrators' Perspectives**

In the days following the fight, school officials held a number of emergency meetings.<sup>1</sup> I sat in on two in which staff took very seriously the violence that had ensued, but went through great lengths to avoid addressing race.

### **1. Meeting #1, January 14, 2010**

The first meeting was attended by the principal (a white male), one of the assistant principals (a black female), the school counselors (all white women), the district deputy sheriff (a white man) and the two community assistants (both black men), who served largely as hallway monitors. The focus of the meeting was on how to more successfully secure the Jefferson High School building—especially during afterschool hours—in order to avoid another incident. The principal said that coaches and teachers in charge of afterschool activities should wait with students until all of them had gotten rides home. If there were students whose rides were consistently late, the coach or teacher should tell their parents that they would not be able to participate in the afterschool activity. The assistant principal challenged this suggestion. She said that if teachers felt like they had to wait for every student in an afterschool program to leave the building before they could go home, they would be less willing to sponsor afterschool activities. The principal felt that this was an issue of “school culture” that needed to shift. He said, “Afterschool activities are privileges, we are not babysitters and there are serious security issues. We need to change the climate of teacher responsibility.”

The focus of the meeting was on immediately securing the facility in order to make sure that no further incidents occurred; and they talked about the need to change the bell indicating the start of after school afterschool activities from 3:00 PM—20 minutes after the school day officially ended—to 2:55 or 2:50. At the end of the meeting, I mentioned that the students who were participating in the Intergroup program might be resources for dealing with the underlying racial issues that led to the altercation. All of the

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<sup>1</sup> Wolcott's (1973) seminal ethnographic study of a school administrator found that administrative meetings largely functioned “to give visible evidence of being engaged with the ‘problems and issues’ of schooling” and to “validate existing status hierarchies....What actually transpired at any of the meetings was never as important as the underlying issue of who could call a meeting and for what purposes...” (p. 122). He found that most of the goals intended for meetings were rarely met.

adults in the room seemed perplexed by my suggestion. One person said there was no way that students could be involved because of issues of confidentiality. Another said that involving other students would not do any good because, “Kids are kids, they’ll say what they’re going to say. One group will have a story that may not be the same as another group’s story.” They quickly decided that while this may be something to consider in the future, “right now, we’re dealing with security.”

After the meeting concluded the principal asked to talk to me. He called the white male assistant principal down to sit in on the conversation as well. He said, “I know there are some students who have prejudice in this school. We’ve talked about this before. In the world, this stuff is out there. But I don’t think this is the majority of our students. I think the majority of our students are tolerant and respect diversity.” I agreed but said that during my time at the school I had also observed that there were a lot of racially hostile interactions between students. The assistant principal responded:

Really it’s not a race problem—it’s a gang problem. We have students who are wannabe gang bangers, but they aren’t really. I saw the tape of the fight and what we thought happened isn’t what happened. One student [white Cameron] who said he was trying to break the fight up, threw a punch at Blake and he was white. So it wasn’t really a race thing.

For him, the fact that one white student had hit another was evidence that the fight could not possibly be racial, despite the fact that racial slurs heightened the altercation. He continued:

Cho’s parents don’t speak English. When we called the house we had to speak to his Aunt so she could translate. So a group of knuckleheads were picking on him and he dropped the N-bomb and they got upset, but he didn’t really even know what he was saying. These students don’t even know what it means when they say stuff like that. [White] Cameron is getting suspended—he’s a wanna-be gangster anyway.

I tried to push them to consider that perhaps race was a factor as well by saying, “Well, whether or not it was actually racial, the students at this school think it was, and it seems like that should be addressed in some way.”

Although the administrators agreed that there may have been some “racial undertones” to the fight, they quickly turned to a discussion of the fact that Jefferson was supposed to be a Title I school. In other words, they viewed what had happened as directly

related to the fact that there were many low-income students in the school that the district failed to acknowledge. The racial tensions were completely sidestepped, as was the possibility of using the Intergroup students in a proactive way. Race was willfully ignored, and class—the district’s failure to accept their Title I status—was used as its proxy. They decided that we should meet again at 9AM the following day. The next day there was not a meeting.

## **2. Meeting #2, January 19, 2010**

A few days later I went to ask the principal about rescheduling the meeting to talk about the fight incident. He said, “Yeah, we really do need to schedule a meeting and I want to get the social workers involved too, but this is triage. I know there are principals in the area who come in and think ‘Hmm, what am I going to do today?’ But here it’s like we come in and deal with one crisis after another.” He admitted that he simply had not had time to prioritize a follow-up meeting. He was on his way to a separate meeting about the new disciplinary policy, which included many of the people he wanted to talk to about the fight, and invited me to walk there with him. When we arrived at the conference room, one of the black female assistant principals was there along with three of the counselors (white women), the school social worker (a white woman) and the school psychologist (a white woman).

Like the previous meeting, instead of addressing the racial tensions within the school they brainstormed how to implement punitive, zero-tolerance policies. These included putting the school on lock-down and threatening any students who participated in “bullying” with expulsion. I finally spoke up and suggested that the school had a race problem that they were clearly ignoring when brainstorming solutions. Again, one of the administrators responded that the issue was not about race, but rather bullying. When I pushed back that it was “bullying around race,” the school social worker admitted that she had not considered proactive ways they might address the issue. Instead, her initial reaction was to punish the students who had participated, not to think about preemptive or long-term intervention. She thanked me for my insight.

It was clear that even the top school officials were scared to talk about race and lacked the knowledge, skills and confidence to address it in their school, even with each

other. Moreover, when racial incidents were in full display, they were able to manipulate these events to be about something, anything, other than race. This was confirmed when I asked straightforwardly, “How are you dealing with your race issues?” At this point in the conversation it was obvious that I was frustrated, and it was obvious that they did not want to discuss race. After everyone in the room stared at me blankly for a full minute, the school psychologist responded, “Honestly, we just ignore it. We don’t talk about it.” I then suggested that perhaps it was something they needed to talk about, both in this meeting, as well as in the school more generally. I told them that the research I had conducted thus far indicated there was a lot of race-based bullying and discrimination happening at the school (see Chapters 4 and 5) and that adults seemed to have few tools to address it (see Chapters 3 and 6).

Finally, the group agreed that perhaps it would be a good idea to consider ways to provide some support and training to staff and students around issues of race, but were puzzled about what this would look like in practice. The principal then said, “We can’t go to the board with race issues. They don’t want folks to talk about that. What else can we call it?” Much of the remainder of the conversation focused on ways to present a bullying prevention program to the school board that was palatable—one that did not mention race.

### **C. Teachers’ Perspectives**

The day after the fight teachers heard whispers from the students about the incident, but they received little information from the administration about what had happened. The direction they did receive indicated that they should not discuss the incident with students. As Ms. Armstrong, a white teacher, described:

*Ms. Armstrong:* Well I heard the rumor about it. I mean from what we heard, which was third-hand watered down...some black kids were picking on an Asian kid, a white kid stuck up for the Asian kid and then called the black kids the N-word and then there was a fight.

*Shayla:* You heard this from students or you heard this from the administration?

*Ms. Armstrong:* No, students....The principal writes this email: “Rumor control: there was this incident and, uh you know, if the kids are talking about it, don’t say anything about it.” Like he didn’t tell us anything, but created more speculation. And then at the staff meeting it wasn’t really talked about either. It was all you know...it wasn’t clear at all. But yeah, the kids had all the low-down.

Mr. Collins, also white, said that he had received information that was “very vague, no detail.” As a result, he was unsure how he should go about engaging with his students. Frustrated, he said, “You know, if I have two kids in class that fought, I would like to know. The kids know it. We don’t even know!”

Unlike students who were talking about the fight independently in the hallway and in the structured, facilitated space of Intergroup after school, teachers did not have this kind of community or space to engage in conversations about race, violence, and student tensions. Moreover, it had been made very clear by their administrators that they would not be supported should they choose to do so. Though frustrated by the request of administrators to keep the incident quiet, they largely complied and spoke of the incident only when asked directly by me.

#### **D. Framing the Project**

The story of the fight illuminates the ways in which race relations are reproduced in schools through the willful ignorance of adults and the hyper-racialized exchanges of students. Rather than learning how to build positive relationships across difference and providing opportunities for young people to interrupt biases and stereotypes, schools reinforce the dominant racial structures in which black students are marginalized, targeted, and oppressed. This project argues that American schools have failed to address the relational aspects of education—how young people get along with each other, how they connect with their teachers, and how race mediates these experiences. As a result, young people—and their teachers—are learning to interact in ways that reinforce, rather than interrupt, racial bias, discrimination, and conflict, and that reinscribe social structures that privilege whiteness.

In our schools, teachers and administrators largely adopt colorblind frames in which they invoke “class” and “culture” to avoid talking about race. However, despite this silence, race remains a salient identity, and a regular point of conflict for students and teachers in integrated schools. While many adults envision schools to be “the great equalizers”—places in which race and racism are overcome—students are often engaging in problematic and discriminatory racial exchanges and are receiving little guidance, support, or intervention from their educators about the larger implications of their

interactions. Not surprisingly, the relationships between teachers and students in schools mirror the racial hierarchies in the larger society. Students of color are marginalized, demeaned, and oppressed, and white students are assumed to be inherently better behaved and higher achieving. Moreover, these hierarchies lead to conflictual relationships and misunderstandings between white teachers and blacks students (Noguera, 2008).

This project suggests that in order to create schools that are socially just, in which students' racial identities and performances do not predetermine their schooling experiences, schools must enact models of practice that encourage critical interrogation of race issues? and deal explicitly with social injustice, diversity, and discrimination.

## **II. ENTERING THE JEFFERSON COMMUNITY**

I first arrived at Jefferson on a sunny day in June of 2009, six months before the fight, with two colleagues affiliated with a local University. We were hoping to expand an intergroup dialogue project we were already running at two area high schools. In addition, I was hoping to conduct an ethnographic study of race and class at Jefferson.

I drove past three subdivisions of newly constructed homes on my way to meet the Jefferson administrators. A large green and yellow tractor drove slowly in front of me, holding up traffic on the two-lane country road where Jefferson sat. To the left stood a big red barn, a massive corn field, and another subdivision advertising available lots, to the right the sprawling Jefferson campus. My preliminary research, and my recent driving experience, had convinced me that Jefferson was an ideal place to do the kind of project I had long envisioned. Jefferson was at once rural and suburban, new and old, black and white, rich and poor. It was a place where farms and tractors mingled with shiny new cars, big new houses, and racially and economically diverse families in search of the American Dream—all living and going to school together. Even more interesting, Jefferson was an area that challenged traditional notions of how race and class map onto each other. The population of middle-class black residents had soared in the past decade, creating a community in which black and white residents had very similar income levels. Nonetheless, Jefferson also had a reputation among black community members of being a racist area; and many white residents who had been in the area for generations were

concerned about the ways in which the community was rapidly changing. I was intrigued. I wanted to know more.

When I entered the conference room, the principal and one of the assistant principals, both white males wearing suits and ties, welcomed me, a petite black woman in my mid-twenties, and my two colleagues, Naomi Warren, a white woman, and Michael Spencer, a Native Hawaiian man, with warm smiles and strong handshakes. After giving us a chance to talk about the intergroup dialogue program, they confided their own struggles and frustrations as leaders of the school. The principal looked me in the eye and said, “Diversity is our biggest strength, but also our biggest challenge.” He continued that many (white) community members had not been able to view the increasing racial diversity of the school as an asset. As a result, they regularly dealt with tensions around issues of race among students, teachers, parents, district administrators, and the larger community—some so great they led to physical altercations.

The administrators felt that if they could more effectively deal with issues of diversity, other concerns they faced around student conflict and achievement might improve. Their hope was that by partnering with us, Jefferson would be able to create a school environment in which diversity was truly a strength, students from different backgrounds got along with each other, and teachers and staff were finally willing to tackle issues that made them uncomfortable. For the next two years, I worked on this project as a researcher, facilitator, and program coordinator. I listened to, observed, interviewed, and facilitated discussions with administrators, students, and teachers in offices, classrooms, hallways, lunchrooms, afterschool programs, professional development workshops, and, sometimes, in their homes—all in the hopes of better understanding the ways in which race mattered in their everyday lives and providing them with opportunities to think more critically and creatively about how they might build a more socially just school at multiple levels of the system.

### **III. STUDYING RACE AND THE FUNCTION OF CULTURE AND CLASS**

Anthropologists and sociologists have long argued that race is not a biological reality, rather it is a “social construction” that is given meaning because of the particular historical, political, and social context in which it is located (Harrison, 1995). Nonetheless, the reason why this meaning can be assigned is because individuals in a

particular setting—in this case, the United States—have an idea of what race “looks like.” Although not always accurate, when students walk into a classroom, their teachers and peers categorize them racially—white, black, Asian, multiracial—based on the labels society has assigned to particular reoccurring physical traits and cultural performances. In the American context we have very firm ideas about who counts as “black” and who counts as “white,” rooted in our history of slavery, inequality, Jim Crow, Civil Rights, politics, and popular culture (Clarke & Thomas, 2006). These labels are attached to bodies, which are, in turn, attached to histories and social and political realities. In other words, “race” is important, in large part because of the reality of “racism” (Harrison, 1995; Mullings, 2005).

Racism, according to Mullings (2005), “. . . is a set of practices, structures, beliefs, and representations that transforms certain forms of perceived differences, generally regarded as indelible and unchangeable, into inequality” (p. 684). “Racism” has been conceptualized by scholars in a number of different ways. Many talk about racism as the combination of prejudice and power (Tatum, 2003, 2007). In other words, racism consists of holding discriminatory and biased attitudes about a group based on racial identity *and* having the power to deny said group access, opportunity, and resources as a result of those biases. Others conceptualize racism as a “structural” rather than individual-level phenomenon. In this model racism is not about how individuals feel about those from different racial groups, but rather as a social system in which certain groups are privileged and others are oppressed because of their racial identity—often without intentional or conscious thought by everyday citizens (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). Finally, a third body of work argues that because “racism” is such a historically laden term, it is no longer a useful category of analysis when conceptualizing bias and inequality. Rather, when the “r-word” is put on the table, it shuts down conversations and puts individuals on the defensive, instead of opening up space for dialogue and reflection (Blum, 2002).

For the purposes of this dissertation I conceptualize “racism” as a largely structural phenomenon—as a *system* that privileges and oppresses certain groups often without the knowledge of those individuals who have the power to maintain the system. In turn, I talk about many of the exchanges between students and teachers as “racial” rather than “racist”—denoting that for the most part they are not intentionally

contributing to a system of inequality even if the sum of their actions ultimately do. When I use the term “racist” to refer to individuals, I am using it in the most “common” and “colloquial” way. In other words, I use it to refer to those individuals who have *consciously* and *overtly* expressed disdain for those of a different racial background.

However, “race” is not just about one’s location in a particular social hierarchy, it is also cultural. Culture is the way people make meaning of their lives—their values, beliefs, knowledge, ways of thinking, worldviews, and preferences; the ways they perform those meanings—their norms of behavior and interaction, styles of dress, and ways of speaking; and the values placed upon those performances by members of the cultural group as well as those outside of the group. Culture both informs and is informed by race, class, gender, and other social identities. Individuals who consider themselves to be a part of a particular social group—in this case a racial group—often have particular cultural norms that accompany that group membership (Geertz, 1973). In other words, culture is that which defines one’s collective experience in the world; it explains why groups have different norms, expectations and ways of making sense of their lived realities.

For example, low-income white youth may make meaning of their lives and perform their identities in ways that are different from middle-class Black youth. Similarly, middle-class white and Black youth might share cultural norms that poor youth from similar racial backgrounds do not; and Black youth of all class backgrounds might share particular cultural norms that are different from those of white youth. For the purposes of this research, culture is particularly important in regards to how it becomes “capital” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Referring back to the previous example, the racial identities and cultural performances of students are “markers” that indicate how individual students are read and treated by teachers and peers. Most often, black students are read negatively while white students are read positively. Not surprisingly, academic achievement falls along these lines as well, with black students underperforming when compared to their white counterparts. In other words, “race” is more than a project in “identity.” These moments of categorization and identification are both structural and cultural. They not only indicate how one makes meaning and performs meaning, they

also indicate lived realities in which access to resources and opportunities is allocated along racial lines (Gregory & Sanjek, 1994).

While race and culture are very commonly investigated in ethnographic studies of schooling and education, class is often overlooked as a relevant point of entry. This is not to say that class is altogether ignored. Rather, class is often discussed through the lens of “race” (or culture) in which black youth are thought to be inherently poor and white youth are not. In part, the inability of scholars to disentangle class and race stems from our general struggle with making sense of class in the U.S. context. Perhaps because of the strength of racialized discourse, the ways in which wealth distribution and social status falls along racial lines, and the dominant American narrative that suggests that class position is “earned” in a way that race is not, we have failed to develop language for how to discuss and make meaning of differences in class. In many ways, this dissertation is no different. It also treats class as an “aside” to race. However, it seeks to do so in a way that moves notions of class and race intersections forward.

In large part, my treatment of class in this project is rooted in the fact that most of the students had very little class consciousness and very limited awareness of their own “class” positions—the factors that influence one’s access to social opportunity, mobility, and capital. They did not know if their parents had attended college. When they did know, they were often unsure if they had graduated or what degree they had earned. They did not know their parents’ income or debt, and they often did not know what their parents did for a living. For example, some students knew their parents worked at a bank, but they did not know if they worked as tellers or as financial analysts. Similarly students might have known their parents worked in the auto industry, but were not sure if they worked on the line or if they were engineers. The only “marker” of class that students seemed to have knowledge of was housing. They realized that those students who lived in apartments and trailer parks, were likely not as well-off as those who lived in houses. Nonetheless, other than those who rode the same bus, most students were not exactly sure where their classmates lived. As a result, I found that students from a range of economic backgrounds thought of themselves as “middle-class”—even when there were disparities in their economic resources.

This is to say that students did not have strong class identities in the ways that they had strong racial identities. Moreover, teachers very much struggled to read “class” on their students. As a result, what is presented here is not a study of class per se. Instead, this project notes the ways in which class is selectively invoked to make sense of disparities in race in a context in which, unlike many communities, there were not significant class disparities between different racial groups of students. In fact, data from the U.S. census and American Community Survey, 2005-2009 finds that black and white families living in Jefferson had very similar levels of income. In turn, class is important in this study because it reveals that even in moments in which black students are not poorer than white students, our racial frames suggest otherwise. As Sherry Ortner (2006) writes, “...there is no class in America that is not always racialized and ethnicized, or to turn the point around, racial and ethnic categories are always already class categories” (p. 73). Similarly, Faye Harrison (1998) notes that “blackness” symbolizes the “social bottom...and a host of related characteristics (e.g. cultural deprivation, criminal threat, intellectual deficiency, economic parasitism, welfare dependency, hypersexuality, reproductive irresponsibility, etc.)” (p. 612). In turn, while this project is largely a study of race, it also explores the ways in which class gets “tangled up” (Nespor, 1997) in race, even in circumstances in which there are no significant class differences between racial groups.

#### **IV. THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CLIMATE**

Between 2009 and 2011, when the research for this project took place, the country was going through a monumental shift with regard to issues of race and class. In January of 2009, Barack Obama took office as the first African American and first multi-racial president in the United States. His election was both a marker of how far US race relations had come and how far they still had to go. Many touted his presidency as evidence that we were finally living in a “post-racial” society—one in which colorblindness, the position many white liberals had long adopted (Guinier & Torres, 2002), was now a reality. They saw Obama’s background—the son of a white American mother and an African father—as testament to an increasingly multicultural society in which binaries like “black” and “white” had crumbled. However, the assumption that the

U.S. had moved beyond race would be challenged over and over again through the experiences of those intimately familiar with the ways in which race still mattered in their daily lives (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011).

Despite “post-racial” claims, Obama was called a monkey (Apel, 2009), accused of being a Muslim (Cohen & Shear, 2010), and asked to produce his birth certificate in order to prove that he was a US citizen (Condon, 2011; Shear, 2011). His wife Michelle Obama was caricatured as an angry black nationalist (Kugler, 2008). Never in the history of the United States had such attacks been made against a president (Associated Press, 2009), perhaps because never in the history of the United States had a president been a self-identified black man. Those who believed racism was a thing of the past were forced to look at how racism was happening on a national scale, directed at the country’s most powerful leader.

When Obama took office, the U.S. economy—which had already been on the downslide—crashed (Swagel, 2009), bringing class to the forefront of American consciousness as well. Obama’s story as a boy from a modest background who became president (Obama, 2004), fit into the mantra of American meritocracy—if you work hard, you will do well in school; if you do well in school, you will do well in life, regardless of your race, class, gender, family background, school, or teachers.<sup>2</sup> Obama proved it. However, when the economy crumbled people from all backgrounds were forced to rethink this narrative. The well-off lost their homes. The well-educated lost their jobs. Those who had been the most precarious in their socio-economic positions—people of color (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011; U.S. Department of Labor, 2012; Williams, 2011), low-wage workers in the service industry, and blue-collar industrial workers

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<sup>2</sup> Although a new conversation in mass media, scholars have long documented the ways in which the notion of America as a meritocracy is largely a myth—particularly for African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans and Americans living in poverty. For example, Manning Marable’s (1983) book *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America* argues that the US capitalist system is inherently inequitable in ways that systematically disadvantage African Americans. Ten years later, Massey and Denton’s (1993) *American Apartheid* similarly argued that patterns of racial segregation in the US, manufactured through overt and covert racism, perpetuate urban inequality, despite individual efforts. Anyon’s (2005) work *Radical Possibilities: Public Policy, Urban Education and a New Social Movement* also argues that urban school reform cannot transcend “macroeconomic policies like those regulating minimum wage, job availability, tax rates, federal transportation, and affordable housing...” (p. 2). Similarly, Bowles and Gintis’ (1976) seminal work *Schooling in Capitalist America* also documented the ways in which educational outcomes reproduced the social and economic position of students’ parents—what they call “intergenerational inequality.”

(Mulligan, 2011; Solis, 2010)—were hit especially hard. In Michigan, where this study took place, the crisis reached appalling proportions. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2009 the unemployment rate topped 9% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). For African Americans, the unemployment rates were even greater, topping 20% (U.S. Department of Labor, 2012). Even the most devout meritocrats were forced to acknowledge what many scholars in the social sciences had long recognized, that “hard work” does not guarantee financial success in all times for all people (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Ornstein, 2007).

It was in this time of crisis—one in which notions of race and class were being challenged, questioned, and reframed at a national scale—that this study took place. In 2009, many of the beliefs that had precariously held together our social system were turned on their heads. We lived in a world that was simultaneously said to be “beyond race,” and yet was so entrenched in race that even the president could not escape its grasp. We lived in a capitalist democracy in which families who had followed the rules and were living rather comfortably saw their class position transform before their eyes. This dual reality seeped into our public schools, as well. Students, teachers and administrators struggled with if, how, and why race and class continued to matter in a time when so many wanted to believe they did not (Kozol, 1991; Lareau, 2003; R. Rothstein, 2004).

Jefferson High School was not immune to these shifts. It was a school in which teachers claimed to be colorblind and students claimed to be “post-racial” at the same time as racial tensions were palpable and racial brawls were happening in public view. It was a school in which many Jefferson families had attained their middle-class status through blue-collar labor in the manufacturing industry—an industry whose failure rattled their precarious economic positions. With regard to race and class, Jefferson was the quintessential, 21<sup>st</sup> century American community. At the same time, it was unique in ways that push us further in thinking about race, class, and education.

## **V. WHERE SCHOOL REFORM GOT STUCK**

The ways our society is structured along lines of race and class were laid bare in 2009. However, the ways in which leaders in education reform conceptualize the causes

of, and solutions to, our failing school systems did not change (Au, 2009; Karp, 2010). Rather than grasp hold of the revealing moment to consider how race and class matter in schools, most so-called education reformers continued pursuing the accountability and standards movement that had gained prominence in the Bush era with the 2001 passage of *No Child Left Behind* (Darling-Hammond, 2004). The goal of this legislation, which had bipartisan support (Welner & Weitzman, 2005), was to significantly raise standardized test scores in English and math by 2014, especially for students who had historically underperformed. Schools were evaluated each year based on improvement in standardized test performance. Those that failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) multiple years in a row were harshly sanctioned.

While many praised the Bush administration for taking education seriously and using federal power to improve schools—a job previously relegated to the states—the policy was also harshly criticized. The most prominent criticism was that NCLB failed to provide the funds and supports necessary to turn around failing schools (Arce, Luna, Borjian, & Conrad, 2005). Instead, those who struggled most were also most likely to be punitively punished. NCLB asked schools to compete without taking into account the structural inequality in our education system in which low-income students and students of color are more likely to go to lower-resourced schools with less experienced teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Moreover, it did not take into account the ways in which cultural differences and racial biases shaped the experiences and outcomes of those students. It assumed that punishing and, ultimately, reconstituting or closing “failing schools,” would inherently improve the education system as a whole—despite the fact that none of the issues that caused the failures were being addressed (Borkowski & Sneed, 2007; Gay, 2007).

Interestingly, the NCLB legislation did provide an opportunity to think about race and class in schools by mandating that districts disaggregate their test scores by race and economic disadvantage for the first time (Rebell & Wolff, 2009) in an effort to close the “achievement gap” (called an “opportunity gap” by progressive educators who see it as an issue of access rather than achievement). Nonetheless, conceptualizing issues of race and class as a measure of standardized test achievement alone was inadequate for the struggles faced by actual schools in dealing with these issues on the ground. Moreover,

the data that was being collected did not trickle down to the school level. At most public schools in the United States, teachers and school-level administrators remained in the dark about how young people from different racial and economic backgrounds were doing, despite the fact that the districts they worked in were reporting this information to the state and federal government.

For over a decade now, school reform in the United States has been obsessed with market-based approaches (Giroux, 2009; Saltman & Giroux, 2009). In particular, supporters believe that increasing competition between schools, restructuring those that are failing, and expanding the choices of parents and students improves educational access, opportunity, and outcomes, especially for the most marginalized students. This approach, focused on choice and competition, overlooks the very pressing issues of race, culture, bias and discrimination in schools which undeniably affect the outcomes and experiences of students (Jordan & Cooper, 2003).

When Obama took office in 2009 many educators hoped he would reverse NCLB, which by that time was understood across party lines to be a failure. However, his education team stayed the course. Like its predecessor, the Obama administration focused almost exclusively on achievement, as measured by standardized test scores, and teacher quality, as measured by degree attainment and “value added” (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010; Saltman & Giroux, 2009). In 2009 the US Department of Education, led by CEO of Chicago Public Schools, Arne Duncan, announced the first phase of the Race to the Top initiative. Race to the Top was a federally sponsored grant competition for educational funding. It required that states put together very detailed applications in which they explained how they were going to improve their school systems. The 12 states with the best applications were then awarded hundreds of millions of dollars (McNeil & Maxwell, 2010; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2011). However, there was a catch. In order to qualify for the funding, states had to make “standards-based” changes to their educational policies that were in line with market-based educational reform (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). In particular they were required to expand charter schools (C. Payne & Knowles, 2009), allow for failing districts to be taken over by the state, and link teacher tenure and evaluation to student test scores, regardless of where teachers worked or who they were charged with educating. Michigan, like many in the

nation, made the requested changes to educational policy. After two consecutive attempts, they ultimately failed to receive the money (Scott, 2011).

In 2009, national educational reformer Diane Ravitch—a conservative who worked for the Bush administration during the creation and authorization of NCLB—published *The Death and Life of the Great American Public School* and went on the lecture circuit in an attempt to undo what she considers her mistake of that time. In particular, Ravitch (2010) criticizes market-based reforms rooted in top down models of change, in which schools are treated like businesses. She argues that the current reform model creates two problems. First, the experiences of those who are actually working within schools are not taken into account in the development of policies to improve them. As a result, buy-in from the stakeholders who will be responsible for implementing reform initiatives and educational policies is very challenging to attain.

Second, those leading these reform efforts know very little about education. Most of the individuals making education policy decisions have not spent any sustained amount of time inside of public schools. Rather education leaders are more likely to be recruited from the business and economic sectors where they spend their days crunching numbers, formulating management strategies, and developing ways to privatize corporations (and schools), than the field of education (Reitzug & Peck, 2012). Few have ever been teachers. In fact, a surprising number, including Duncan and Obama do not even have personal public school experiences.<sup>3</sup> From school boards to superintendents, the people with the most power to shape education in our country, states, and districts are often so far removed from the classroom they do not have a strong sense of what is happening within schools at the interpersonal level. As a result, they largely fail to address these issues in any meaningful way, and provide very limited resources to those individuals who are on the ground—our students, teachers and school administrators—to truly improve education.

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<sup>3</sup> Both Barack Obama (Punahou School, Honolulu) and Arne Duncan (University of Chicago Laboratory School) attended private schools. Barack Obama currently sends his daughters to private school (Sidwell Friends School) in the Washington, DC area. Arne Duncan's daughter goes to a high-achieving public school in Virginia (Anderson & Turque, 2010; Winerip, 2011).

Ravitch's work illuminates much about what is wrong with the direction education has taken in this country.<sup>4</sup> However, while Ravitch advocates for the importance of giving students diverse course offerings and subject areas, her work also overlooks the social and relational aspects of schooling. Currently, there is no prominent effort to address the ways in which schools reproduce racial hierarchies and racist ideologies. Nor are there any efforts to interrupt teacher racial biases that lead to patterns of discipline that disproportionately target poor students and students of color and that contribute to gaps in achievement that fall along lines of race, class, and gender.

## **VI. BUILDING MORE JUST SCHOOLS**

### **A. Beyond Test Scores: What Else Matters in Schooling?**

My work indicates that schools need to be concerned with more than just test scores. Since the 1950s educational ethnographers, anthropologists, sociologists, and other progressive scholars have understood that in order to truly reform schools, the interconnected issues of race, class, and culture must be attended to—not only in disaggregated test scores, but also in daily interactions, experiences, and meaning making.<sup>5</sup> These studies have found that if students do not feel connected to their peers and their teachers (Valenzuela, 1999); if they are being targeted or profiled as uneducable and out of control because of their racial background (A. A. Ferguson, 2000; A. Gregory, Noguera, & Skiba, 2010; Noguera, 2008); if their cultural, racial and class experience is not being represented in the curriculum (Gay, 2000; Mahiri & Sablo, 1996); if they are not

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<sup>4</sup> For Ravitch, the major mistake of current school reform is that the focus on accountability and standardization narrows curriculum to focus primarily on those content areas that will be measured—reading and math—limiting students' access to other subjects such as history, music, art, and science. Moreover, because states are scared of the punitive measures that will be taken if they do not perform adequately, many have “dumbed down” their state standardized tests. As a result, most standardized tests do not require critical or higher order thinking. Recently, it has been discovered that a number of school districts who seemed to have some of the most significant improvements in achievement were falsifying test scores—including the Washington, DC schools, overseen at the time by Michelle Rhee, a prominent and respected leader in national school reform (Turque, 2011). Overall, Ravitch finds that the only tangible outcomes of recent education reform initiatives are increased administrative and teacher anxiety, increased teacher dissatisfaction, an increased likelihood to teach to the test, and fewer opportunities for students to have a well-rounded educational experience.

<sup>5</sup> Carter, 2005; Defreese, 2011; Dance, 2002; Erickson, 1987; Fine, 1991a; Foley, Levinson, & Hurtig, 2000; Foley, 1990, 1991; Fordham, 1996; Heath, 1983; Jacob & Jordan, 1993; Mead, 1951; Morris, 2006; Ogbu, 2003; Price, 2000; Spindler & Spindler, 2000

learning things that are applicable and relevant to their actual lives (Ladson-Billings, 1995); if what they are learning in classrooms is not providing them with the skills to be productive, engaged, and critically thinking citizens in an increasingly multicultural society (Banks, 2007; Freire, 2000; Giroux & Robbins, 2006) if they are being terrorized because of their race, class, gender or sexual orientation by simply walking into their school buildings (Dessel, 2010; Poteat & Digiovanni, 2010), they are unlikely to do well on standardized tests. But perhaps more importantly, how well they do on these tests will not indicate much about how prepared they are for life in an increasingly multicultural world.

Addressing issues of social and relational justice is essential to larger goals of education reform: closing the achievement gap, increasing graduation rates and college attendance, decreasing disciplinary disparities, and improving the competitiveness of U.S. graduates. Unfortunately, these are also the areas that educational reform and policy are least likely to address. As a result, most schools do not have the knowledge or incentives to ask pressing questions about how race matters in their schools, nor do they have the skills to work proactively on these issues.

## **B. Racial Reproduction and Relational Justice**

In schools, the biases, stereotypes, assumptions, and prejudices that students and teachers bring into the building, and that underlie structural inequality and institutional racism are not interrupted.<sup>6</sup> To the contrary, they are sustained, reinforced, and normalized. Scholars in many different fields have long noted the ways in which schools largely serve to reproduce the existing social structure by valuing the social and cultural norms or “capital” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1984) that the most advantaged students come to school with.<sup>7</sup> As a result, schools’ outputs often mirror their inputs. Low-income students and students from racially marginalized backgrounds who are not privy to what Delpit (1988; 2006) calls the “culture of power” or who are unable to adopt this culture when necessary (Carter, 2005) are likely to remain marginalized adults; and students from racially and economically privileged backgrounds are likely to

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<sup>6</sup> Delpit, 1988; Fine, 2004; A. E. Lewis, 2003; MacLeod, 1995; McCarthy & Crichlow, 1993; Oakes, 1985

<sup>7</sup> Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Eckert, 1989; Foley, 1990; Heath, 1983; Lareau, 2003; Oakes, 1985

maintain their social status. Put another way, those who already possess the markers of power retain it, and those who do not, never get access to it.<sup>8</sup>

Most work on reproduction has used class-indicators and societal-level outcome measures—such as trends in achievement (as measured by standardized test scores), employment, housing, and incarceration rates—as evidence that schools are reproductive. For example, the seminal texts *Learning to Labor* by Paul Willis (1977) and *Ain't No Makin' It* by Jay MacLeod (1995), found that low-income young men were caught in cycles in which they were unable to transcend their class positions on the job market. As MacLeod found, race mediates these outcomes making it even more difficult for students of color to attain higher status positions than those of their parents.

Other educational ethnographers focus on the academic underachievement of black students as the site of reproduction. These works conclude that schools are reproductive institutions because students of color (who are also often low-income) do not perform as well as their white counterparts. Similarly, a number of studies have considered the ways in which schools reproduce racial status through the disproportionate suspension, expulsion, and dropout rates of black and Latino students (Dance, 2002; A. A. Ferguson, 2000; Fine, 1991b; Noguera, 2008). Interestingly, many researchers who empirically investigate race relations in schools still rely primarily upon class reproduction and class indicators as their dominant explanatory framework (D. E. Foley, 1990). Few have wrestled adequately with what it means to say that schools are “reproducing” *racial* inequality as well—particularly in places like Jefferson where class status cannot be used as a proxy for race, where being black does not equate to being poor (Mueller, Lewis, & O'Connor, 2007).

In *Race in the Schoolyard*, Amanda Lewis (2003) begins considering the answer to this question. Her project focuses on “how race (in terms of meaning and identity) and racial inequality (in terms of access to resources) are reproduced in day-to-day life in schools.” She conceptualizes schools as “race-making institutions” that reinforce race as a social category (Omi & Winant, 1994; Pollock, 2004). In other words, in addition to reproducing disparities in academic outcomes, schools also reinforce what it means to be “black” or “white.” As she writes, “race is not merely a fixed characteristic of children that

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<sup>8</sup> Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Rist, 2000; Willis, 1977

they bring to school and then take away intact, but something they learn about through school lessons and through interactions with peers and teachers” (p. 188).

My work builds upon this concept of racial reproduction by suggesting that something more is being reproduced in schools than social positions, as measured by test scores and future employability. In other words, my project is not so much about why, or even *if*, black students do poorly academically. Rather it is about the ways in which schools allow for the perpetuation and maintenance of hierarchical race relations in which black youth are subordinated and seen as all that is “bad” while white youth are seen as all that is “good.” As Weis (1990) notes, the reproduction of the existing social order is not simply the reproduction of wealth but also of “power and privilege” (p. 3).

This project is about how schools are stuck in cycles of racism, racial bias, and racial segregation facilitated by colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2010) and colormuteness (Pollock, 2004) on the part of adults, and hyper-racialization on the part of students. It is about how all of these relations maintain hegemonic systems of racial dominance, not just at the structural and institutional level, but also at the ideological level—in the hearts and minds of our young people, their teachers, and their administrators. Arguably, this kind of reproduction is the most dangerous of all because it is so much more difficult to locate, particularly in a moment in which we have convinced ourselves that we are beyond race. The reproduction of racial bias individuals in schools is not easily represented in charts or spreadsheets (although it is arguably the foundation for these numerical disparities); it cannot be “disaggregated”; and it is difficult to summarize in a news blurb. Instead, it is the unconscious biases, covert methods, discursive strategies, and relationships of injustice that this project seeks to uncover and examine.

It should be noted that schools are not intentionally reproducing the larger social and racial structures that maintain our system. In fact, most teachers, administrators, and even students view themselves as actively working against the pull of race and class stratification in our country. Nonetheless, as Erickson (1987) writes, “domination and alienation of the oppressed does not simply happen by the anonymous workings of social structural forces. People do it” (p. 353). In the following chapters, I follow these people doing the maintenance work. I explore their relationships with each other across race, with the hope of illuminating how racial reproduction might be interrupted. This study suggests

that in order to achieve social justice, we must also contend with *relational* justice. In other words, in order to make systems and institutions more equitable, we must first cultivate the kinds of individual and group relations in which discrimination is interrupted, racial biases are challenged, racist actions are not tolerated, and in which those from different racial backgrounds have authentic, respectful, and caring relationships that interrupt the dominant power structure that privileges whiteness. In order for students, teachers and administrators to enact justice-oriented policies at the economic, political, and institutional level, they must first believe in and practice justice at the personal, relational level.

### **C. Models of Practice: Toward Social and Relational Justice in Schools**

In March of 2008, then presidential hopeful Barack Obama called for a national conversation on race. Not unlike the teachers and administrators of Jefferson, race was a topic Obama had explicitly tried to avoid. Painting himself as evidence of the “American Dream” of bootstrap lifting, Obama had run a “colorblind” campaign in which he ignored his racial identity. However, the controversy surrounding his relationship with Jeremiah Wright, a black pastor who white commentators called a racist, forced him to tackle race or risk losing the election.

The Obama camp crafted a thoughtful and measured speech in which he proclaimed, “...race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore right now.” He went on to say that the controversies surrounding his candidacy “reflect the complexities of race in this country that we have never really worked through...” This could not be more apparent than in our public schools, which Obama highlighted repeatedly as a one of the most prominent, and arguably most devastating, sites of the conflict around issues of race.

Obama also talked about issues of class and work. He commented on the struggles of white folks who have “worked hard all their lives, many times only to see their jobs shipped overseas or their pensions dumped after a lifetime of labor.” He said that they are “anxious about their futures, and their dreams slipping away.” They, “don’t feel that they have been particularly privileged by their race”, and struggle to understand the frustrations of African Americans whose racial hostilities seemed directed at them.

In many ways his speech was a clarion call for the kinds of considerations the previous sections have advocated. He said that the ills we face—the legacy and current incidents of discrimination—“are real and must be addressed. Not just with words, but with deeds—by investing in our schools and our communities...” However, the words he spoke in Philadelphia, less than a year before his election and little more than a year before the research for this project began, did not translate into a plan of action. We have continued to ignore difficult conversations that could move our society forward in ways that are more just.

Some believe that if teachers could learn to better understand their students, if students could learn to better understand and interact with each other, and if pedagogy and curricula took students’ cultural and social histories into account, reproduction could be interrupted. A number of progressive scholars have suggested that the first step is reconsidering not only how race and class shape interactions, but also the content and goals of education, particularly as they relate to issues of social justice. However, the work of these scholars has been critiqued for being overly theoretical and ultimately failing to provide teachers with social justice-oriented models of practice that they can utilize on the ground in their classrooms. This gap between the theory and practice of social justice education is particularly troubling in light of the many struggles public schools are experiencing around issues of identity and difference. However, practitioners working primarily at the university level in the area of intergroup dialogue—a process of face-to-face conversations between diverse groups of people about social identities and social justice—have developed a model that could be utilized in K-12 schools to more effectively address issues of race and class.

Within public schools, intergroup dialogue has the potential to act as critical and culturally relevant pedagogical practice by bringing to the forefront of discourse issues of social identities, cultural difference, and structural inequality. Moreover, by providing a structured space in which students and teachers can collectively deconstruct systems of oppression and consider the ways in which they individually contribute to their maintenance, it may be possible to interrupt racial reproduction in schools.

## VII. OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

Chapter 2 provides a brief history and demographic profile of the Jefferson community, school district, and high school. It highlights the ways in which Jefferson is both a unique environment, and one where issues faced by the vast majority of U.S. high schools are present. In this chapter, racial and economic shifts are juxtaposed against test scores and graduation rates, complicating the picture of how race and class interact in education. In addition, it gives an overview of the research site and methods.

Chapter 3 explores the administrative structure of Jefferson High School. It investigates how the school board, superintendent, and school-level administrators suppressed and avoided race in ways that set the tone for the district as a whole. It illustrates how an individual school district, dealing with pressure from the federal and state governments and from its own community, attempted to maintain the status quo of willful ignorance through informal policies and practices.

Chapters 4 and 5 investigate the ways in which students at Jefferson made meaning of, and interacted around, race. Chapter 4 explores hyper-racialized discourse and verbal bullying between students. It argues that white and black students relied upon post-racial ideologies to excuse oppressive racist commentary that targeted the most marginalized students. Moreover, it identifies the ways in which white students were dealing with racism in their own families, despite claims that they had personally moved beyond race.

Chapter 5 examines how students performed their racial identities. It argues that black students responded to the verbal harassment of their white peers through physical intimidation that served to reinforce negative stereotypes. In addition, it highlights the biases white students held about their black peers that they could not justify as joking.

Both chapters indicate the prominence of race in the lives of high school students, and provide cautionary tales of the damaging ways in which these identities are navigated when schools do not provide a structured space for students to consider difference.

Chapter 6 includes teachers in this puzzle. It finds that teachers fail to interrupt racial bullying and struggle with how to effectively incorporate issues of diversity in their teaching. However, teachers also have hyper-racial interactions with students. This chapter investigates the phenomenon of students accusing teachers of being racist in overt

ways that are simultaneously joking and serious. Like the student interactions, this “game of racism” is a thinly veiled cover for tense and hostile race relations between the two groups. However, despite these interactions, teachers adopt colorblind frames in which they invoke “class” and “culture” to avoid talking about race.

The final chapter, Chapter 7, asks what the possibilities are for taking action to improve the school culture and climate around issues of race and class through methods of intergroup dialogue. It explores what happened when teachers and students were provided with a structured and facilitated space to engage in “race talk.” It finds that while there are many challenges to implementing these kinds of opportunities, dialogue has the potential to interrupt student prejudice and provide teachers with the skills and knowledge to more effectively address issues of discrimination and difference in their classrooms and schools.

## **VIII. CONCLUSION**

The national focus on “standards,” “accountability,” and “testing,” has precluded educational initiatives that value the relational aspects of schooling or that interrupt the reproduction of racial hierarchies. Rather than viewing schools as public, democratic institutions in which teachers actively work against inequality to develop well-rounded, critically thinking, engaged citizens, who are able to work and build relationships with those from very different backgrounds than their own, current reform efforts are serving only to privatize, corporatize, and punitively punish public schools and educators. The immense pressures faced by public schools to raise test scores in a climate of heightened race and class tensions, has not been accompanied by efforts to look honestly at the ways in which social identities play out in our schools or how our education system might do a more effective job at addressing the issues that underlie buzzwords like the “achievement gap.” As a result, it is not just class positions that are being reproduced, but also hostile racial relations, racial prejudice, and racial discrimination, through the day-to-day practices of administrators, students, and teachers. It is this forgotten area of schooling that this dissertation addresses—the area that is most overlooked by those in positions to make structural change, and most pressing to those on the ground working everyday with young people and their teachers.

Against the backdrop of the 2008 presidential election, which brought changing notions of racial inequality, and the 2009 economic crisis, which shook the faith of many in our capitalist system, this work explores how students, teachers, and administrators at one rapidly integrating Midwestern, exurban high school, navigated and made meaning of race and class. Moreover, it considers the possibility of helping them do it more successfully through methods of intergroup dialogue. It asks, “How is race navigated and reproduced in our schools?” and “How can this reproduction be interrupted.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Taking Over the Neighborhood: The Making of an Integrated Exurban Community**

The black parents, they're just so happy to be here, so happy to be out of [the City] out of [the factory town], they don't say anything... You think when you run out to the suburbs it's better, you'll have more stuff, but is someone there to nurture your soul? Your child's soul? 1 + 1 will always equal 2 wherever you go. But it's the soul part that's not everywhere. Parents aren't thinking about that. They're just happy it's pretty...  
-Black Staff Member, January 27, 2011

#### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Jefferson is an exurban community outside of a major manufacturing city. Known also as the “rural-urban fringe” (Sharp & Clark, 2008) and “outer ring suburbs” (Lee & Leigh, 2007), exurbs are located beyond metropolitan borders. Pfeiffer (2012) defines exurbs as “areas of new, low-density, and rapid housing development located beyond the contiguous swath of postwar suburbia but within its community shed” (p. 67). Exurban residents are close enough to major metropolitan areas to commute to jobs there, but far enough away to have lives distinctly different. According to Davis, Nelson and Dueker (1994), “...within any exurbia there are suburban subdivisions, large farms, small towns, some factories, ranchettes and hobby farms”—all of which can be found in Jefferson (p. 45).

Jefferson is located between a large college town and a dying factory town that houses two other small school districts. At the time of this study, Jefferson was the newest, largest, and highest performing when compared to these two districts. It had the highest median income and the largest percentage of white students. To many black families from the major city and factory town, which were both populated by low-income black residents and housed low performing schools, Jefferson represented the American Dream on a budget.

Between 1990 and 2010 African American families flocked to Jefferson in their “desire to live as homeowners in safe communities [and to] get ‘more house for less’” (Pfeiffer, 2012). As Ms. Conger, a Jefferson teacher explained, “I think a lot of people have come out this way because [the college town] is too expensive....I know there’s a lot of people that work in [the city] or surrounding areas and just came out this way ‘cause it’s not the city.” The influx of these families into Jefferson’s newly constructed subdivisions significantly changed the racial make-up of the community and schools and challenged the notion that black was a synonym for poor. Nonetheless, the blue-collar background of many Jefferson families, combined with the deindustrialization of the previous two decades and the collapse of the auto industry (Farley, Danziger, & Holzer, 2000; Newman, 1999; Weis, 1990), made the class positions of Jefferson residents rather precarious (Newman, 1993). However, this precariousness was not racialized in the ways expected. Rather, unlike most integrated communities in Jefferson, black students were not from lower income families than their white counterparts.

Ethnographic studies of education have often failed to acknowledge the ways in which class mediates racial experiences in school. Most school ethnographies focus exclusively on race—discussed through the lens of “culture” (Mueller, Lewis, & O’Connor, 2007). These works tend to confound race and class, often positing black and Latino youth as poor, and white youth as middle-class. Not surprisingly, this trend has led to a significant number of ethnographic texts concerned with the experiences of poor, Black and Latino youth, and very few exploring those of middle-class youth of color (Lacy, 2007; Ogbu, 2003; Pattillo, 1999) or poor white youth (Eckert, 1989; Morris, 2006; Willis, 1977).

Beyond the field of education, ethnographic studies of black communities have also focused almost exclusively on impoverished and/or urban black residents.<sup>9</sup> These studies have been largely concerned with “the most destitute, threatening and disreputable residents,” who are made to represent the whole of the black community (Wacquant, 1997, p. 348), failing to capture the economic diversity of the black

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<sup>9</sup> Anderson, 1999; Bourgois, 2003; Duneier, 1992; Gwaltney, 1980; Hannerz, 1969; Jackson, 2001; Liebow, 1967; McQuillan, 1998; Newman, 1999; Stack, 1975; Young, 2004

community. Similarly, few ethnographic texts capture the experiences of poor and working-class whites in the United States (Hartigan, 1999; Weis, 1990; Weis, 2004).

Some scholars, primarily in the field of sociology, have investigated the lives and experiences of the black middle-class. In particular, Mary Patillo-McCoy's (1999) *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril Among the Black Middle Class* and Karyn Lacy's (2007) *Blue Chip Black: Race, Class and Status in the New Black Middle Class* explore the lives of the black "middle-class." While some have argued that Patillo-McCoy's informants would have been better labeled "working-class" given their professions, wealth, and income, the community she studied is in many ways not so different than Jefferson economically. However, her work investigates the lives of lower-middle-class black residents in a racially homogenous community. In contrast, Lacy explores the lives of black people living in integrated suburbs. However, her study focuses almost exclusively on the lives of adults.

In short, there are few compelling analyses of schools systems that simultaneously study the educational experiences of black youth who are not poor (Ogbu, 2003) and white youth who are not middle-class. This is not surprising given Pollock's (2004) observation that "rarely do we successfully analyze race and class simultaneously, looking within 'race groups' for class patterns and within class groups for race ones" (p. 145). Investigations of this nature are challenging in large part because race and class are so interwoven in the United States. A few ethnographic works have managed to provide more complex analyses of race and class in schools. These studies have explored the different educational experiences of white and black students. They conclude that even when students are from similar class backgrounds, race mediates their schooling experiences in ways that reproduce the U.S. racial hierarchy (Heath, 1983; A. E. Lewis, 2003; MacLeod, 1995).

This chapter, and those which follow, builds on the findings of ethnographers who have complicated race and class. It gives a profile of Jefferson and illuminates the ways in which it was at once a unique community that challenged notions of how race and class intersect, and one that felt quintessentially American, where familiar race relations permeated community life. While this project does not fully accomplish the goals of "successfully analyzing race and class simultaneously," it moves in the direction of

answering the questions: “What happens in integrated schools when racially marginalized students have class privilege?” and “Can class disrupt the reproduction of racial inequality in schools?” The following sections provide a context for considering these questions.

## II. A BRIEF HISTORY

The history of Jefferson is one of tense racial integration, industrial development, growth, and deindustrialization. The school district was founded in 1924 after 13 one-room districts across five townships were consolidated, allowing them to pool their financial resources, retain teachers more effectively, provide more individualized attention to students, and expand the curriculum. From the 1920s through the early 1950s, most of the families in the area were farmers who lived on large plots of land. In addition to farming, many worked part-time in the manufacturing industry at plants in nearby towns and cities. By 1950 while many families still farmed in some capacity, 75% of students in the district came from homes in which their parents were also industrial workers.

In 1956 a major manufacturing company opened a plant in the district, attracting thousands of new employees and their families from the metropolitan city nearby. Since that time the Jefferson Plant has continued to employ over 2,000 workers, many who are the parents and grandparents of children in the school district. The life of Ms. Flournoy, a white teacher, is the quintessential Jefferson story:

*Ms. Flournoy:* My family’s been in the area for over 100 years. My mom used to live on a little dirt road up here and she’d walk to a little school house....My grandma went to Jefferson when [it] was K-12. My great grandma actually went to the school houses. There’s a gas station on the corner....There used to be an old farmhouse and my grandmother grew up there with like nine of her siblings.

*Shayla:* What kind of farmers were they?

*Ms. Flournoy:* Just corn and soy, just the basic mass production.

*Shayla:* And you didn’t apparently end up in that industry?

*Ms. Flournoy:* No, well they also worked at [a major manufacturing company]. Yeah, my grandma retired and my grandpa worked there and they farmed. I’m the first one to graduate college...I didn’t want to work in the factory....[After the

recession] they started hiring again in the 90s. That's when all my cousins started graduating because I'm the older of the generation. They had the family thing so they started re-hiring the family. So I'm in college struggling, they're making, you know, 25 dollars an hour.

*Shayla:* And you coulda been in the factory making good money.

*Ms. Flournoy:* And my grandmother was so upset with me, yeah, "I can get you in, I can get you in."

Ms. Flournoy's experience was prevalent among white families in Jefferson. In fact, her daughter was a student in the district. Many white families had been in the area for generations and had only stopped farming in the past generation. A lot of these families were still working in the manufacturing industry. Others, like Ms. Flournoy were part of the first generation of folks to pursue professional careers.

In the 1970s the Jefferson School District annexed a portion of a very poor, black, nearby rural school district nearby for \$1. As one employee of that time recalls:

Most of them, the black Jefferson kids, had no running water, they had outhouses. But they never missed a day of school. The stuff I did back in those days would be illegal now....One boy, he never missed a day of school. I knew he was living hard, so I brought him home with me. When we got there, he got in bed with all his clothes, shoes, coat, everything. He had been sleeping cold at home.

The incorporation of this area increased both the racial and economic diversity of Jefferson schools and set the stage for notions that blackness and poverty were inextricably linked. This ideology would permeate race relations in Jefferson even after middle-class black families began moving into the area and poverty-stricken black farmers no longer existed.

### **III. BUILDING THE EXURBS**

In the 1990s, housing developers saw an opportunity to capitalize on Jefferson's location and expansive farmland. They bought land from families who had been farming in the region for generations and quickly built single-family homes with 1,500 to 3,000 square feet, in a number of adjacent subdivisions. In addition, they constructed smaller

mobile home communities. Between 1989 and 2009, the number of homes in the district almost doubled from 5,850 to 11,564, 22% of which were built after the year 2000.<sup>10</sup>

New residents, looking for their shot at the American dream, quickly followed the new construction, greatly increasing the population between 1990 and 2010. Twenty-six percent of Jefferson residents moved into their homes between 1990 and 1999. Another 60% moved in after the year 2000 (Appendix, Table 9.2). Most of these new residents were homeowners. In 2009, 67.5% of the housing units in the district were single-family homes and 86% of these houses were owner occupied.<sup>11</sup>

Not unlike most suburban and exurban communities in the Midwest, the homes in Jefferson's subdivisions were strikingly similar two-story houses, built with siding in neutral colors, on small but immaculate lawns. The subdivisions, boasting names like Jefferson Elms, Willow Lake, or River Oaks, were quiet, with cul-de-sacs, sidewalks, and in some cases, wooded trails. The more expensive homes had brick facades and arching entryways. In 2009, the median home value in the area was \$187,400—\$40,000 higher than the state average. More than 43% of homes in the Jefferson school district were valued at over \$200,000—almost a third of which were valued at over \$300,000. Although expensive when compared to the median home value of the state, Jefferson was significantly more affordable than the nearby college town where the median home price was 37% more (Appendix, Table 9.3).

The large majority of new houses in the district were purchased at the height of the housing bubble by families who were victims of subprime mortgages. When my research began in the fall of 2009, the homes in the district were worth significantly less than what their owners had paid for them in the late 1990s and earlier 2000s. By December of 2011, months after the fieldwork for this study was concluded, zillow.com

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<sup>10</sup> This contrasted significantly with the major city where 84% of homes were built prior to 1959, and the college town where 69% of homes were built before 1979. Jefferson was by far the newest of these communities (Appendix, Table 9.1).

<sup>11</sup> While 67.5% of the housing units in the district were single-family homes, mobile homes and new apartment complexes on the edge of the district also made up a significant portion of housing. Mobile home communities, which were largely populated by lower-income white residents, accounted for 19.6% of housing in the district. Like the middle-class subdivisions, these communities were built in the mid-1990s. In addition, there were a number of apartment complexes populated primarily by African American residents. Combined with a few other attached units, these apartments accounted for 13% of the housing units in the district.

listed over 100 homes in the area in foreclosure. Many were being rented out by families who qualified for federal assistance. One of the white staff members who lived in a subdivision in the district was particularly frustrated with how the housing crisis was affecting her neighborhood. She described her subdivision as the “ghetto” because of all of the properties being illegally rented out by owners in over their heads—presumably to black families. Housing developers in Jefferson also suffered, halting home construction in many of the subdivisions. One of the most expensive subdivisions, located across the street from the high school, had 36 houses at the end of the 2010-2011 school year. However, the roads and sidewalks laid suggested that the developers intended to build many more. By 2012, many of the subdivisions were still advertising lots for sale.

#### **IV. A “MIDDLE-CLASS” COMMUNITY AT THE END OF INDUSTRY**

Although Jefferson had many middle-class trappings, as Patillo-McCoy (1999) notes, “‘middle-class’ is a notoriously elusive category based on a combination of socioeconomic factors (mostly income, occupation, and education) and normative judgments (ranging from where people live, to what churches or clubs they belong to, to whether they plant flowers in their gardens)” (p. 13). While a number of professors and graduate students affiliated with universities in the area lived in Jefferson and sent their children to Jefferson schools (Appendix, Table 9.4),<sup>12</sup> most residents were able to afford their lifestyle through blue-collar work in the service industry and the manufacturing industry—one of the largest in the country (Appendix, Table 9.5). Thanks to strong unions, these jobs historically provided good salaries, benefits, and pensions to black and white families, allowing them access to middle-class incomes without high levels of education (Sugrue, 1996). During the fieldwork for this study, the manufacturing industry that had sustained many Jefferson families collapsed. Simultaneously, the housing market also crumbled. The combination of a failing industry, a failing housing market, and a community with only average levels of education created a complicated class situation.

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<sup>12</sup> Two of the black students in this study, Winnie and Trevor, had parents who were either university professors or in the process of getting PhDs. Pamela, another black student, had a father who was a Prosecutor and a mother who was a Psychotherapist.

**A. Education**

On par with the national average,<sup>13</sup> in 2009 the majority of adults in the district (68%) did not have a four-year college degree<sup>14</sup> (Appendix, Table 9.6). What made Jefferson unique was that Black adults were more likely to have college degrees than their white counterparts. While 38% of black adults had a bachelor’s degree or higher, only 30% of white adults did. Moreover, a much higher percentage of white adults had no college education. While 37% of white adults had a high school diploma or less, only 20% of black adults had no college education. In turn, black adults in Jefferson were more highly educated than white adults in the area.

Table 2.1 EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF POPULATION OVER 25 BY RACE  
JEFFERSON SCHOOL DISTRICT

	<i>Black</i>			<i>White</i>		
	Male	Female	<b>Total</b>	Male	Female	<b>Total</b>
Population 25 years and over	1,377	1,334	<b>2,711</b>	7,440	7,493	<b>14,933</b>
Less than high school diploma	71	97	<b>6.2%</b>	845	813	<b>11.1%</b>
High school graduate or equivalent	238	147	<b>14.2%</b>	1,873	1,976	<b>25.8%</b>
Some college or Associate’s degree	679	440	<b>41.3%</b>	2,502	2,458	<b>33.2%</b>
Bachelor’s degree or higher	389	650	<b>38.3%</b>	2,220	2,246	<b>30%</b>

2005-2009 American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates

Given the history of the community, this was not surprising. Black families, most who had only recently moved to Jefferson, were upwardly mobile. For them Jefferson represented the opportunity to live out their suburban dreams in large homes and peaceful neighborhoods. In contrast, many more of the white adults had been in the area long before the developers descended and were from rural Appalachian backgrounds.

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<sup>13</sup> According to the US Census Bureau, around one-third of adults over the age of 25 in the United States have a bachelor’s degree.

<sup>14</sup> Slightly more than a third of Jefferson adults had some college or an associates degree, and a third had a high school diploma or less. The remaining third had a bachelor’s degree or higher. This was in line with the state average, significantly higher than the major city, and significantly lower than the average educational attainment of adults in the college town.

## B. Income

Because there were not great racial disparities in educational attainment, there were few disparities in income by race. Jefferson residents were both very poor and surprisingly affluent given their educational background. More than 50% of families, black and white, made over \$75,000 per year in 2009—almost \$25,000 more than the national median income, and almost \$30,000 more than the median income for the state. Moreover, a number of families made over \$200,000 per year. Interestingly, black families were significantly more likely to make over \$150,000 than white families. While 11.58% of black families made over \$150,000 only 5.85% of white families did.

Although black families were more likely to be affluent than white families, they were also more likely to be poor. Thirty-one percent of black families living in the Jefferson district made under \$50,000 per year, while only 26% of white families made under \$50,000 per year. Moreover, while the majority of those families living in poverty were white (73.5%), black families made up a disproportionate number of those living in poverty (25%) when compared to their overall population (16.5%) (Appendix, Table 9.7). Although black families were somewhat more likely to live in poverty, for high school-aged youth, the rates of poverty were about the same for black and white students. In fact, white 15-17 year olds were slightly more likely than black 15-17 year olds to live in poverty.<sup>15</sup>

Table 2.2 FAMILY INCOME BY RACE OF HOUSEHOLDER

Income	JEFFERSON DISTRICT		MAJOR CITY DISTRICT		COLLEGE TOWN DISTRICT	
	<i>Black</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>White</i>
Total Households	1,399	6,283	152,631	27,967	2,603	24,339
less than \$30,000	23.80%	12.30%	44.4%	40.75%	31.5%	9.7%
\$30,000-\$49,999	7.36%	14.10%	21.9%	21.8%	22%	11.3%
\$50,000-\$74,999	17.80%	23.00%	16%	17.05%	14.5%	15.3%
\$75,000-\$99,999	22.30%	21.40%	9.3%	8.3%	11%	14.7%
\$100,000-\$124,999	10%	16.00%	4.4%	5.3%	5.3%	12.6%
\$125,000-\$149,999	7%	6.66%	2.1%	2.0%	7.0%	9.0%
\$150,000-\$199,999	8.79%	4.85%	1.13%	2.6%	6.4%	12.8%
over \$200,000	2.79%	1%	0.67%	2.2%	2.3%	14.6%
Median Income	\$64,858	\$68,730	\$29,128	\$30,230	\$32,716	\$60,215

2005-2009 American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates

<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, all children under 14 were more likely to live in poverty than those over 14. This may indicate that the lower-income families were those families newer to the area with younger children.

### C. Black Mobility, White Stability

The relatively narrow income gap between black and white families in the Jefferson district made it particularly unique when compared to the major city and major college town nearby, where class and race were much more closely interwoven. Unlike most integrated communities in the United States, Jefferson's black residents were not necessarily poorer than the white residents. In fact, in some instances the black residents were more affluent. Moreover, Black residents in Jefferson were much better off than Black folks in other cities and towns in the region. They had more than twice the median income and significantly more education than their black counterparts in the major city. And while Jefferson residents overall had lower incomes and significantly less education than those in the college town, black families in Jefferson had almost twice the median income of Black families in the major college town.<sup>16</sup> In other words, Black families in Jefferson were the most affluent of African Americans in the region.

In his seminal study, *Ain't No Makin' It: Aspirations and Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood*, Jay MacLeod (1995) finds that young people's ideologies of mobility are mediated by their racial background. Low-income black families in his study who resided in public housing projects saw their residence as "a step up in social status; some families came from worse projects in the area, others from tenement flats in the black ghetto. Moreover, some of the [black] parents...have moved up from the south, bringing with them a sense of optimism and hope about making a fresh start, feelings that have not yet turned into bitterness" (p. 130). In contrast, the white youth in his study—who had resided in the area longer and were unable to blame the economic failures of

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<sup>16</sup> In the college town, over 50% of black families made less than \$50,000 compared with only 21% of white families. Similarly, while 27.4% of white families made over \$150,000, only 8.7% of black families did. There were similar disparities in college attainment. While 67% of white adults over the age of 25 had bachelor's degrees, only 36% of black adults held bachelor's degrees or higher. Overall, just under 70% of black adults in the college town had some college or more. In contrast, almost 80% of black adults in Jefferson had some college or more. In turn, although the college town was overall a much more highly educated community, black residents in Jefferson had higher educational attainment. In the major industrial city, black and white families were both significantly more likely than those in Jefferson to be very poor, with 60% of families from all racial backgrounds making less than \$50,000 per year. Nonetheless, even in this very low-income city, white residents were more likely to be on the higher end of the income scale. While 8% of black families in the city made over \$100,000 per year, 12% of white families made over \$100,000 per year.

their families on racism—were disillusioned with their social positions and were not hopeful about their prospects for mobility.

While MacLeod's study took place two decades before the research for this project began, his findings speak to the ways in which race mediated notions of social mobility in Jefferson, as well. Black and white residents had very different interpretations of what living in the area symbolized. For black families who had come from lower-income areas, living in Jefferson meant they had acquired the American dream and were giving their children resources and opportunities that had not been attainable a generation before. However, many white families compared their economic positions to their white counterparts in the nearby college town. They did not view Jefferson as an economically prosperous place in the same way. As, Ms. Guthrie, a white teacher, described:

*Ms. Guthrie:* I think that anybody who lives in this school district is not upper middle class. Because if they were, and they had the beliefs inherent in that class, they would not live in Jefferson. I believe that. *italicize*

*Shayla:* Where do you think they would live?

*Ms. Guthrie:* [The college town]...I mean you can't say that with 100%, but for the most part, when people have enough money to live somewhere they will live there. They will seek out, for whatever reason or another...When I socialize with...people I hear them say, "Jefferson," and it's like [when] they find out that you live there, it's like, "Oh, should I be living there?"

As Ms. Guthrie explained, Jefferson was not an impressive place to live according to her white-middle class friends. In contrast, when black students talked about living in Jefferson they talked about having social status and resources that their peers in the City and factory town did not.

#### **D. The Future of the Blue-Collar "Middle-Class"**

Because of the failure of the manufacturing industry, many students' parents were unemployed or struggling to find regular work. Families were also struggling to stay in their homes. As globalization, mechanization, deindustrialization and the demand for deskilled labor increase, sustaining middle-class lives will likely be even more daunting for future generations of Jefferson residents (Wilson, 1996).

Because most students at Jefferson did not have college-educated parents they did not have adequate support to pursue higher education at four-year institutions. Rubin's (1976) findings in the late 1970s that "few working-class parents have any real idea about the cost of a college education" and that most "don't discriminate between the local junior college and the university" holds true for the large majority of families in Jefferson—even those with middle-class trappings. Not surprisingly, after graduating from high school, significant numbers of Jefferson students attended community colleges nearby, rather than four-year universities, and continued living at home with their families. Although students said they planned to use the two years to save enough money to eventually transfer to one of the highly ranked four-year universities in the state, in reality most did not have the grades or resources to do so. In turn, while many of the students had more financial resources than their counterparts in the major city nearby—especially black students—they did not necessarily have access to the necessary social, human, economic or cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1984; Coleman, 1988).

In 1999, Patillo-McCoy argued that black middle-class youth are likely to be less well-off than their parents. If this were true in 1999 (and in 1976 according to Rubin) it was certainly true in 2009, a time in which the economic downturn made it difficult for new college graduates of all races to find employment. Crises such as these continue to disproportionately affect black families and working class and poor white families—the young people whose experiences are captured on these pages. In turn it is very possible that the students in Jefferson will have to contend with much more difficult economic circumstances than they were raised in, further contributing to the precarious nature of their middle-class status.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The 1education report *A Nation at Risk* (United States., 1983) argued that for the first time, newly educated youth would not surpass the skill-level and employability of their parents. According to the report, "individuals in our society who do not possess the levels of skills, literacy, and training essential to this new era will be effectively disenfranchised, not simply from the material rewards that accompany competent performance, but also from the chance to participate fully in our national life" (p. 7). The risk was thought to be especially pressing for students of color. Although academic responses to this report have varied, it is clear that concern for students' preparation for jobs in a new globalized area has been a part of national discourse for almost 3 decades. Given the current economic trends, it is safe to say these concerns persist, in both the findings of academics and the hearts, minds, and experiences of citizens. As Rubin (1976) writes about the working-class "...there's a heartache in the realization and pain in knowing that their children probably wont be much better of than they. For under such circumstances, only the hardest,

## V. A CHANGING DISTRICT

### A. Race: The Black Kids Moved In

By 2010, the small exurb of Jefferson was an emerging middle-class community trying to figure out how to navigate issues of race and class. Most of the growth in the Jefferson community happened as a result of middle-class black families with school-aged children moving into the district from the major city and dying factory towns nearby. School aged children between the ages of 5 and 17 made up almost 30% of the total black population in Jefferson. In contrast, school-aged children made up only 17.9% of the total white population (Appendix, Table 9.8).<sup>18</sup>

Table 2.3 STUDENT POPULATION BY RACE

YEAR	JEFFERSON SCHOOL DISTRICT			JEFFERSON HIGH SCHOOL		
	Total Students	White	Black	Total Students	White	Black
1925	595	--	--	--	--	--
1960	1,960	--	--	--	--	--
1992	3,320	2,835 (85%)	416 (12.5%)	824	687 (83.4%)	118 (14.3%)
1995	3,805	3,112 (82%)	606 (16%)	989	816 (82.5%)	157 (15.8%)
1997	4,043	3,214 (79%)	706 (17%)	1,082	881 (81.4%)	179 (16.5%)
1998	4,109	3,230 (78.6%)	751 (18.3%)	1,060	836 (78.9%)	198 (18.7%)
1999	4,188	3,259 (78%)	782 (18.7%)	1,080	851 (78.8%)	200 (18.5%)
2000	4,408	3,346 (76%)	914 (20.7%)	1,164	881 (75.7%)	245 (21%)
2001	4,521	3,383 (75%)	969 (21%)	1,204	904 (75%)	255 (21.2%)
2002	4,729	3,390 (72%)	1,129 (24%)	1,300	938 (72.2%)	307 (23.6%)
2003	4,926	3,449 (70%)	1,240 (25%)	1,390	965 (69.4%)	365 (26.3%)
2004	5,042	3,410 (68%)	1,387 (27.5%)	1,495	1,000 (66.9%)	435 (29%)
2005	5,040	3,294 (65%)	1,499 (30%)	1,534	983 (64%)	488 (31.8%)
2006	4,985	3,201 (64%)	1,513 (30%)	1,537	981 (63.8%)	487 (31.7%)
2007	4,925	3,067 (62%)	1,557 (32%)	1,563	947 (60.6%)	537 (34.4%)
2008	4,766	2,958 (62%)	1,514 (32%)	1,549	923 (59.6%)	549 (35.4%)
2009	4,797	3,004 (62%)	1,465 (30.5%)	1,460	870 (59.6%)	503 (34.45%)
2010	4,578	2,802 (61%)	1,405 (31%)	1,429	844 (59%)	493 (34.49%)

State Department of Education

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the most ambitious, the most motivated toward some specific occupational goal will ever get through college” (p. 208).

<sup>18</sup> Not only were black residents in Jefferson more likely to be young, they were also less likely to be old. Of the total white population, 64% were adults over the age of 25, while only 55% of black residents were adults over 25.

The growth in young black families was especially apparent in the racial make-up of Jefferson schools. Between 1992 and 2010, the number of African American students more than doubled, growing from 12.5% to 31%. The numbers of white students shrank from 85% in 1992 to 61% in 2010. In the high school, where this study took place, the number of black students grew even more rapidly. There, almost 35% of students were African American in 2010 and slightly less than 60% were white.<sup>19</sup> The racial transformation in Jefferson was happening not only as a result of an influx of upwardly mobile black families, but also because of white flight—if not in residence then in schools for their children (French & Wilkinson, 2011). While it is difficult to predict what Jefferson will be like in another decade, given the economic crisis and depleted housing market, historical trends suggest that white families will continue to move to whiter communities as the number of black families in the area increases (Card, Mas, & Rothstein, 2008; M. O. Emerson, Chai, & Yancey, 2001).

These changes make Jefferson not only a unique community in terms of class, but unique in terms of race, as well. In less than two decades the racial make-up of Jefferson changed drastically. As a result, the community was contending with diverse cultural perspectives, worldviews, and notions of race and identity, filtered through common economic experiences.

### **B. Class: A Dream Deferred?**

The racial demographics of Jefferson High School were not the only thing that changed between 1992 and 2010. The percent of students who qualified for free or reduced lunch also more than doubled. In 1995, the earliest year of available data, 18% of students qualified for free or reduced lunch. By the time of this study, 43% of students at the high school qualified.

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<sup>19</sup> Until 2003, the numbers of both black and white students in the district was growing. However, from 2003-2010 the number of white students decreased from 3,449 to 2,802—a loss of 647 students in seven years. During that same period, the number of blacks students in the district continued to rise until 2007, when it peaked at 1,557. In 2010, there were 1,000 more black students than there had been in 1992—a growth of 337%. In contrast, there were 33 fewer white students than there had been in 1992. At the same time as the numbers of African American residents was increasing, the number of white families and students was stagnant or shrinking.

Table 2.4 FREE AND REDUCED LUNCH BY YEAR  
JEFFERSON HIGH SCHOOL

YEAR	% FREE OR REDUCED
1995	18%
1996	18%
1997	17%
1998	21%
1999	18%
2000	20%
2001	21%
2002	25%
2003	25%
2004	27%
2005	29%
2006	30%
2007	10%*
2008	13%*
2009	43%
2010	43%

State Department of Education

Many of the staff at Jefferson believed the increase in economically disadvantaged students was directly related to the increase in African American students at the school. They assumed the new black students were coming from poor, uneducated families. Unfortunately, free and reduced lunch data is not disaggregated by race, so it is not possible to determine exactly how many of these students were white and how many were black. However, while it is true that many of the black students in the district had precarious class positions, as the previous sections have indicated, it is unlikely that the additional black students alone accounted for this increase. The more probable explanation is that significant percentages of both black and white students became increasingly likely to need assistance. The rise in these numbers also indicates that like most places in the nation, the gap between affluent and low-income students in the district was growing, across race.

## VI. STANDARD MEASURES

### A. Achievement

Jefferson was an average performing district academically.<sup>20</sup> In 2008-2009 and 2009-2010, they failed to make Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) as defined by the federal No Child Left Behind legislation. Although they made AYP in 2010-2011, in 2011-2012, the year after the study concluded, Jefferson High School was placed on the statewide Persistently Low Achieving list.<sup>21</sup>

There were race, class, and gender disparities in standardized test performance. Like in most public schools, black students in the district underperformed when compared to white students on every area of the state standardized test. For example, in 2009, 55% of white students met or exceeded state standards in English, whereas only 39% of black students met or exceeded the standards. Similarly, in math, 49% of white students met or exceeded state standards, and only 31% of black students did. This same trend was true for all sections of the test including reading, science, social studies, and writing (Appendix, Table 9.10).

There were also gender disparities in achievement, although these disparities shifted with the particular subject area of the test. In English, reading, and writing, more female student met or exceeded standards than male students. However, male students performed higher than female students in math, science, and social studies. In turn, in addition to performing along stereotypical race lines, the students in the district performed along stereotypical gender lines as well.

Overall, economically disadvantaged students, who made up 23.3% of the 11<sup>th</sup> grade students who took the test, performed the worst of all subgroups on all areas of the

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<sup>20</sup> According to the State Department of Education, Jefferson held an accreditation grade of “C” in both 2009-2010 and 2010-2011.

<sup>21</sup> The PLA list identifies the 98 lowest achieving schools in the state based on standardized test score data. These schools have to develop redesign plans or risk being put in a statewide district for low-achieving schools.

test. Only 35% of economically disadvantaged students met or exceeded expectations in English and only 23% did so in math.<sup>22</sup>

## B. Graduation

While black students at Jefferson underperformed on standardized tests when compared to white students, they had graduation rates almost 10% higher than white students. The graduation rate for black students in 2010 was 83.74%. The dropout rate was 8.13%. However, only 74% of white students graduated in four years; 14.09% dropped out. Black female students had the highest graduation rates in the district at 90%, and the lowest dropout rates, at 5%. White female students also did significantly better than white male students, who had the lowest graduation rates at 67.7% and highest dropout rates at 16.53%. In turn, there were large race and gender disparities in graduation. Black students and female students were more likely to graduate in four years than white students and male students—with white male students doing the worst of all subgroups.

Table 2.5 GRADUATION AND DROPOUT RATES 2009-2010  
JEFFERSON HIGH SCHOOL

	Jefferson		College Town		State	
	Grad	Dropout	Grad	Dropout	Grad	Dropout
Black	83.74%	8.13%	73.58%	<8.9%	56.43%	20.42%
Male	77.78%	11.11%	67.89%	11.01%	48.58%	24.50%
Female	90%	5%	78.1%	6.57%	64.41%	16.29%
White	74.09%	14.09%	91.99%	3.16%	81.69%	8.07%
Male	67.70%	16.53%	92.04%	<5%	78.19%	9.47%
Female	81.82%	11.11%	91.94%	<5%	85.43%	6.58%
Economic Disadvantage	46.34%	34.15%				
Total Male	70.62%	14.43%	86.6%	5.63%	70.82%	13.30%
Total Female	85.37%	8.54%	88.84%	<5%	79.89%	9.25%
Total Students	77.30%	11.73%	87.69%	4.68%	75.23%	11.33%

<sup>22</sup> The state department of education does not disaggregate economic disadvantage by race or gender. As a result, there is no data publicly available on how economically disadvantaged students performed on the State test by race and gender.

## VIII. METHODS

Conducting ethnographic and qualitative research in public schools is a challenging endeavor given the national education reform agenda (see Chapter 1). Many schools are growing increasingly hesitant of giving researchers access to their teachers and students because they fear the findings may have long-term negative consequences in terms of school funding and student enrollment. The accountability movement has created a climate in which researchers are only perceived as useful if they can directly improve standardized test scores—arguably a very challenging feat and one that is not accomplished through cultural studies of intergroup and cross-racial relationships in schools. Perhaps not surprisingly, therefore, my access to Jefferson was facilitated by work I was already doing as an afterschool program coordinator. In 2007 I began working as an Intergroup dialogue facilitator at two high schools in the Jefferson area. In 2008, Jefferson High School, under the administration of Mr. Williams (see Chapter 3) showed interest in beginning an Intergroup dialogue program. However, due to changes in administration, the collaboration did not come to fruition at that time.

In the winter of 2009, after being denied access to a school within which I was hoping to conduct my dissertation research, the possibility of doing Intergroup at Jefferson came up again. In addition to being excited about doing dialogue work at Jefferson, it seemed like the ideal place to conduct my research study. It had racial diversity; it was rumored to have a significant number of black middle-class students and lower income white students—a true rarity in most public schools; it was in a developing exurb; and the new administrators were interested in issues of climate, culture, and social identities. In turn, in addition to pitching the Intergroup dialogue program to the administration, I asked if they would be willing to let me conduct dissertation research as well, which they very generously agreed to. In July of 2009 I moved into one of the multiracial subdivisions in the Jefferson community and began my research.

This study is based on two years of ethnographic participant observation (Bernard, 1994; R. M. Emerson, 2001; Geertz, 1973; Spradley, 1979) and semi-structured qualitative interviews (Kvale, 1996; Weiss, 1994) with staff and students at Jefferson High School. During the 2009-2010 school year, I was at Jefferson every day, often arriving early in the morning and leaving late in the afternoon. During the 2010-2011

school year, I continued going to Jefferson three times a week and engaged in a similar process.

I spent my time in multiple spaces within the school. I often hung out in the administrative offices, talking to the assistant principals and secretaries and watching as students came and went for various disciplinary infractions, illnesses, and pick-ups. I roamed hallways and lunchrooms during the school day, standing at the most crowded junctures during passing periods and noting who was still in the hall after the bell rang. I observed classrooms, often sitting in on the classes of the students and teachers I had officially interviewed. I spent time in the teachers' lounge and hung out with teachers during their prep hours, talking to them about their lives. I acted as an assistant whenever needed, making copies, putting together packets for parent nights, wiping off tables in the lunchroom, putting chairs on desks at the end of the day, checking students in for ACT testing, and "chaperoning" school dances and convocations. In most all of these spaces, I carried a small notebook with me and often scribbled fieldnotes as I was observing. I took note of who was saying what, who interacted with whom, and who was in which spaces in the school. I later transcribed these fieldnotes and coded them for themes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Sanjek, 1990).

Over the two years of my study, I conducted semi-formal interviews with over 50 staff and more than 70 tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade students from diverse racial and economic backgrounds, fairly representative of the overall school population. Student interviews primarily took place in "my office"—a small windowless room with a desk that was not being used at the time—which the school very graciously provided keys to. These interviews happened before school, afterschool and often during the school day, with the permission of students' teachers. In addition, a number of student interviews were conducted at students' homes, on weekends, or afterschool. I went to apartments, houses outside of the district, homes in the countryside situated on acres of land, and met students at fast food restaurants and coffee shops. Teacher interviews were primarily conducted in the classrooms of individual teachers during prep hours or afterschool. Like the fieldnotes, interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and coded for themes (Weiss, 1994).

In addition to these interviews, I “unofficially” talked to almost every staff member in the building and many more students than those captured on tape. I built relationships with custodians, cafeteria workers, secretaries, paraprofessionals, administrative staff, the school psychologist, and the school social worker. I went to lunch with these staff, hung out with them in teachers’ lounges, and chatted with them over mop buckets. Over the course of the study I got to know many of the students, teachers, administrators, and staff at Jefferson fairly well. I learned which of the staff had children, who commuted, who arrived early and who stayed late. Staff sometimes joked that I knew every adult in the building. I also knew many of the 1500 students—especially the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders. I learned which students lived outside the district, whose parents worked in the manufacturing industry, and who was the oldest of many children.

I was not only acting as a “researcher” at Jefferson. My goal was to understand the culture of the school through qualitative and ethnographic research, so that I could assist Jefferson in creating a more socially just school. In turn, during the two years of this study I ran the afterschool Intergroup dialogue program for students and developed a professional development workshop series on race in the classroom for teachers—both of which were provided for free, in exchange for access to the school. As a result, my time was also spent recruiting student and teacher program participants, making flyers, sending reminders, and coordinating classrooms and fieldtrips with students, teachers and administrators. The students and teachers who participated in these programs became the particular focus of my research. I interviewed many of them multiple times—both in my initial qualitative research in the Fall of 2009, and after they had completed the programs and workshop series in the Fall of 2010.

In addition to these sustained programs, I conducted over 20 one-time dialogues on race in the 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> grade English and Social Studies classes of four different teachers. These teachers requested that I come to their classrooms to help them engage students in conversations about the N-word, racial stereotypes and tensions, and student cliques. In this way I was a true “participant observer.” I was both a part of the school system—an adult who was charged with “teaching” students and “training” teachers—and very much outside of it as a researcher, keenly observing the dynamics of race at

multiple levels of the system. This dual role gave me great insight into both the challenges and successes of Jefferson, and provided me with a deeper understanding of the work it takes to truly reform schools around issues of race.

My identity as a petite, young-looking, brown-skinned, Black American woman also positioned me interestingly within the school. I occupied a liminal space (Turner, 1969) not only between “researcher” and “practitioner” but also because I was seen as not quite young enough to be a student and not quite old enough to be a teacher (although I was the same age as a number of the younger teachers in the building). Despite the fact that I worked hard to dress very professionally in order to gain entry into the world of teachers—I never wore jeans, and often wore slacks with dress shoes, skirts with boots, and cardigans or jackets—because of my youth, and my youthful appearance, some staff thought I was in college working on a project for my Bachelors degree, rather than my Ph.D. For the better part of a year, one of the secretaries thought I was 19 when, in fact, I was 27. However, in general this confusion did not pose a problem. Instead, the perception that I was a “young student” made many of the adults—all of whom were obviously committed to education—feel motivated to help me finish my project and get my degree. As a result, they were willing to let me observe their classes and interview them in ways that they may not have been had they not seen me as a student.

There were only a few black staff in the building (see Chapter 3). In turn, I did not “blend in.” Instead, I was a very visible adult who, for black students and staff, represented a much needed ally. For white staff, my blackness made me simultaneously suspicious and credible. Some staff wondered about my motives in studying “diversity” and “race”—something they did not consider a “problem.” Others believed that *because* I was black, I had credibility when it came to these issues that most white adults in the building did not. However, by the end of my research, students and teachers from all backgrounds saw me as an ally they could confide in. I was often called the “keeper of secrets.” Many said they told me things they had not told their colleagues, friends, or family. This was especially true of teachers in my second year of the study. A number openly admitted that while they had been suspicious of me at the beginning, they were impressed with my continued presence, my commitment to my work, and my positive relationships with students. As a result, they had come to trust me much more.

Because of my close relationship with these teachers and students, it is my hope that the information presented in this dissertation is a fair reflection of the challenges Jefferson High School faced with regard to race. What is written is not an assessment of Jefferson as a whole, nor is it meant to present the school in its entirety. Rather, it is a deep exploration of only *one* of many things Jefferson contended with on a daily basis. It investigates how a school—not unlike many schools in the United States—struggled with how to address issues of race in a unique economic climate. While there are many things about Jefferson that made it a unique site, my experience working in schools, my relationships with teachers from other intuitions, and my academic research all suggest that almost nothing written in the pages that follow is unique to Jefferson. Instead, most schools are struggling with whether they should talk about race and how. In turn, Jefferson is arguably *most* unique in their willingness to be a case-study to illuminate the struggles of so many places like them. As a result, all of the names, including “Jefferson” are pseudonyms, and some revealing details of individual informants have been modified, in part to protect the identity and confidentiality of Jefferson, and in part, because the findings of this work have salience far beyond the boundaries of the Jefferson community.

## **IX. CONCLUSION**

The combination of industrial jobs, housing development, and location, facilitated major growth in the Jefferson community during the 20-year period between 1990 and 2010, and provide opportunities for precariously middle-class families to live their dreams for a fraction of the cost. African American families were particularly drawn to Jefferson. As a result of these shifting demographics, racial, cultural, and economic differences were made increasingly salient for students and teachers at Jefferson High School where, like most districts in the country, the majority of teachers remained white women.

Jefferson was a district in which it should have been possible to parse out educational differences that fell along lines of race and class. Teachers, administrators, parents and students could not equate “black” with “poor” in the Jefferson district. Nonetheless, they did—in large part because, despite scholarly efforts to do so (Wilson,

1980), in the context of the United States, these two identities are, in fact, inextricably linked, even in instances in which “income” would suggest otherwise. In turn, as the quote that opened this chapter suggests, and as Kelley (1997) notes, fleeing to “vanilla suburbs” is not always the dream that black parents might have hoped. In fact, it can be just the opposite. It can come at a price.

The complex relationships of race and class at Jefferson make it an exceptional case study for examining the ways in which multiple, intersecting identities influence schooling experiences (Collins, 1990). Jefferson challenges the assumption that “low-income” is a synonym for “black” and, in turn, complicates our understanding of the ways in which teachers and students relate to one another across race. At the same time, the precarious economic background of families in the area, black and white, and the ways in which teachers and students ultimately navigated race on the ground, make it a quintessential American school in which many expected relations played out in sometimes unexpected ways.

### **CHAPTER 3**

## **“What Else Can We Call It?”**

### **Structuring Race and Class in a System of Willful Ignorance**

In my opinion, this district is very...afraid...It's all about concealment and about managing. And so then we don't ever talk about anything. We don't ever stir up anything...but I think if you don't stir up things it...bubbles up and rises and tensions and misconceptions and all those things keep getting perpetuated.  
-Ms. Armstrong, white teacher, January 21, 2010

What school administrators do interests me not only because their behavior affects what happens in the whole complex of formal education, but also because that behavior in turn reflects both the education subculture and the American value system of which educators are a part.  
-Harry Wolcott, *The Man in the Principal's Office*, p.xiii

We can't go to the board with race issues. They don't want folks to talk about that.  
What else can we call it?  
-Jefferson High School Principal, January 19, 2010

#### **I. INTRODUCTION**

As evidenced by the administrative response to “the fight” (Chapter 1), Jefferson was a district in which race and class were silenced, willfully ignored, or talked about in hushed tones. This culture was cultivated and maintained by upper-level administrators—the school board, superintendent, and assistant superintendent—and trickled down to administrators in the high school who understood that “race” was a taboo subject in the district. The school-level administrators worried openly that they could not “go to the board with race issues” without concealing them under the guise of “something else.” The suppression of discourse related to race and class was facilitated by the ideology of “the Jefferson way”—the nostalgic desire for the small, rural, white community of generations past. Attraction to this narrative was so strong among upper-level administrators that the contemporary realities of the district as a rapidly growing and diversifying community were rarely taken into account. As a result, Jefferson High—an exurban school of 1,500—was, according to many, still being run like a rural school of 500.

Though clandestine, the discourse of race and class permeated the school district. Stories of teacher student relationships, student interactions, adult tensions, student achievement, disciplinary referrals, successes and failures were all told over and over again by staff at all levels through the filter of race and class—everyone thinking they had revealed something new, something they were not supposed to know, something I was not supposed to know. While the content of these whispers helped shape the context in which this study took place, the whispers themselves told much about the story, as well. They told of administrators, teachers, custodians, and students who felt silenced. They told of the hesitance and reluctance of those who considered themselves unbiased to talk about social injustices they claimed not to see. And they told of how one school district—not unlike many districts in the country—was able to willfully ignore how race and class did, in fact, matter at all levels of the school system in ways that ultimately reproduced racial hierarchies.

Since Harry Wolcott's (1973) seminal text *The Man in the Principal's Office*, very few school ethnographies have investigated the ways in which administrators contribute to race relations in schools. Ethnographic studies of schools tend to focus on the interactions of students and teachers, overlooking how the culture of navigating race and class develops from the top down.<sup>23</sup> In *Colormute: Race Talk Dilemmas in an American School*, anthropologist Mica Pollock (2004) observes that school administrators are constantly making decisions about how and when race will or will not be discussed, silenced, acknowledged, or ignored. She finds that these power brokers often decide to tackle issues of race in ways that she calls “colormute,” by actively refusing “to talk in racial terms” (p. 3). However, this very act of silencing race, in this case by intentionally deleting racial words from discourse, only served to make race more salient and more complicated.

This chapter focuses on three particular ways in which administrators at Jefferson enacted a colormute system of willful ignorance: 1) through a hierarchical power structure in which only upper-level administrators had authority to make decisions; 2)

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<sup>23</sup> The failure to explore school administration more fully is especially discouraging given the focus of school reform efforts to improve school leadership and the burgeoning propensity to seek these leaders from the business world.

through a hiring process that promoted from within without any structured process; and 3) through the misreporting or non-reporting of data that would have revealed the true struggles the district faced regarding race and class. Against this backdrop of systematic ignorance, Jefferson High School administrators were struggling to think about how to enact practices that might address the needs of their diverse students, and celebrate the increasing differences in their school. Unfortunately, as seen in Chapter 1, their efforts did little to bring voice to racial hostilities and misunderstandings.

## **II. STRUCTURING A SYSTEM OF WILLFUL IGNORANCE**

### **A. Top Heavy Hierarchy**

There was a powerful hierarchy in the Jefferson School District. At the top was the district's elected Board of Education, which consisted of individuals representing the "old guard" of Jefferson farm families, and the Superintendent. Together, these leaders created a system in which race and class were silenced and willfully ignored.

#### **1. The Board of Education**

Among JHS staff and black community members in Jefferson, the Board of Education had a fairly negative reputation. According to many staff, the board was a platform for those long-time Jefferson residents to institute their vision of the district in ways that impeded progress and reform. Many felt board members were unqualified to effectively run a growing district, citing their educational backgrounds, career choices, and lack of diversity as evidence of this fact.<sup>24</sup> As one teacher sarcastically put it:

Don't even get me started on the school board. The school board is designed to make sure there is civilian control so that teachers don't get uppity with their "evolution" and their "book learnin.'" Come on, you've got somebody who's never read a book of education, who has no idea how to guide you or how to run a multi-million dollar operation. They're signing the checks of our bosses. Come on! They're just there to make sure the school reflects the "community standards."

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<sup>24</sup> The board consisted of three white males, three white women, and one black woman. At least five of the seven school board members had some college education. However, none of them worked in the field of education.

Teachers were not only resentful because they perceived the board to lack competence, knowledge and skill, they were also bothered by what they perceived as the board's conservative political agenda and heavy hand, which many felt limited the potential for true learning, and left no room for individual administrator autonomy.

The conflict between the board and the school staff was not unique to this district. As Land (2002) notes, school boards "have frequently drawn criticism for micromanagement and encroachment upon the administration's role" (p. 236). The conflict caused by these managerial practices are magnified by the fact that school boards are made up of elected community members who tend to have little educational knowledge or leadership experience, much to the chagrin of teachers and administrators who must answer to them (Danzberger et al., 1987). While these boards were historical instituted to provide, "local control in order to meet the specific needs and preferences of the resident population," they have been "experiencing a crisis of relevance and legitimacy" (Land, 2002, p. 231-4). In Jefferson, this crisis centered, at least partially, around which "community" and "population" the board was representing and responsible to.

In addition to having a reputation for being controlling, incompetent, under-qualified, and politically motivated (Mountford, 2004), the board also had a reputation, among staff and community members, of being racist. As one teacher explained, the narrative of "the Jefferson way," served to obscure the racial discomfort of the "old guard." According to her, "they always talk about the 'good old days' and when everybody knew each other's names, and we were in a cornfield, and we were all white. Like that's the subtext." She believed that the nostalgia of the Jefferson Way could not be separated from an expression of racial intolerance. Other teachers reported that the racism in the community was not always so covert. There was rumor that in the past two decades there had been cross burnings in the area. While no one admitted to personally witnessing such an event, the narrative of Jefferson as a racist place was prevalent.

A number of students had similar assessments of the school board. For example, Brielle, a mixed race student, told the following story of her relationship with the daughter of a school board member:

*Brielle:* We happen to live across the street from someone that's on the school board and they're like racist 'cause they wouldn't let their daughter like play with me when I was younger, when I first came to this school. So [my mom] thinks that since like the school board has someone racist on it, that they do things like the old fashion way.

*Shayla:* And so they wouldn't let her play with you because you weren't white?

*Brielle:* I guess. I don't know, 'cause like my mom took me over there and introduced me like the first week we moved in, and like the kid was nice, she was like, "Oh, hi," but she never invited me back over to play, so I just felt left out or whatever.

*Shayla:* Were other students invited over there to play? Were there other kids in the neighborhood?

*Brielle:* Yeah, but they're all white and I don't know, I just felt out of place and I asked my mom how come like, 'cause there's a lot of black people that live around us and I was like, "Why don't anyone else play with them?" 'Cause like as kids it doesn't matter who you're friends with...everyone plays together. And then my mom just said that she had found out some things that weren't very good or whatever. She didn't like explain it to me in detail when I was little, but then she later told me it's 'cause that her mom was racist.

*Shayla:* Have you ever talked to her since, now that you are in high school?

*Brielle:* Uh uh, I've never talked to her ever since that day.

*Shayla:* And you all still live across the street from each other?

*Brielle:* Yeah, um hmm.

At the time of this interview Brielle was an eleventh grader. She had lived across the street from this family, and gone to school with the young lady for eight years without ever speaking again. While it is possible that Brielle and her mother, who was white, misinterpreted the reasons for the distance they felt from their neighbors, it was clear that racial hostilities in the district were significant enough that families of color made meaning of their experiences through the lens of racism (Jackson, 2008).

The silencing of race was made clear when a white male student, the son of a school board member, called a black male student the N-word for failing to pass him a book in class. While exchanges of the N-word between students of different racial backgrounds were common at Jefferson, as will be seen in Chapter 5, this interaction was

undeniably hostile. The JHS administrators suspended the student for his actions. However, while apologetic, his mother used her influence on the board to insist that he be immediately reinstated, which he was.

The stories told about the “racist” school board created a climate in which a significant number of staff, students, and parents, had little faith in the district’s interest in, and ability to work for, the best interest of all students—especially those from racially marginalized backgrounds. While some of these incidents of racism among the Board were easier to verify than others, in many ways whether or not they were “true” was irrelevant. As Jasmine, an African American student explained:

Jefferson has a reputation for being racist...Like a lot of the black students feel like the white students and the white administrators and teachers just treat them differently because they’re black...Like my mom really wanted me to change schools, but she didn’t really want me to come to Jefferson and that’s mostly ‘cause it just has a reputation for being racist...Like some of my mom’s friends live in Jefferson School District, but they drive their kids to school in a different district because they don’t want them going to Jefferson.

As Jasmine’s comments reveal, in the broader community, the district was known to struggle with issues of race from the top down. These “race issues” undeniably shaped the ways in which race and class were dealt with among administrators, teachers, and students.

## **2. The Superintendent**

The superintendent of the Jefferson School District was a middle-aged white woman who had worked as an educator for over 30 years and had been at Jefferson for 15. She had a brittle personality that many adults in the district found difficult. However, she could also be found joking with students. In addition, she was close friends with some of the staff, including a black staff member who considered her family. Nonetheless, her tenure as superintendent was rife with controversy. Most of the staff were wary of her as a leader. She was widely known as a micromanager, more concerned with the finances of the district—which many said were in much better shape than she let on—than educational innovation. Moreover, many JHS staff felt that she was not qualified for the position and had been appointed primarily because she towed the line and was good friends with the Board president. According to the school rumor mill, she

had no degree in administration or educational leadership. In fact, a number of teachers claimed she did not have any further education beyond her Bachelor's degree. Her appointment validated the feeling that white "insiders" who had shown dedication to the district and a willingness to abide by the wishes of the Board, were rewarded with positions of power and prestige.

Like the school board, the superintendent had such a strong hold on decisions that school administrators were very cautious of making mistakes. As a result, many tiptoed around her, worrying that they might upset her. Even I was cautioned to approach her with great care. For example, when talking to a school official about whether or not I should discuss the Intergroup program with her, I was quickly told that I should wait until the following week because she was "in a bad mood this week and tends to make rash decisions when she is in a bad mood." Because school officials believed that the mood of the superintendent on any given day ultimately shaped the outcome of policies, practices, and initiatives, change in the district was difficult to enact.

While the superintendent was a highly criticized leader, many reported that her harshness stemmed in part from her own desire to please the domineering Board and the pressures to be accountable to her many constituencies. According to a long-time employee of the school, the struggle to effect change in the district was the result of the failed leadership of consecutive superintendents. "It starts with the superintendent," he said. "And the last four...they've just been trying to keep their jobs. Make the board happy." As a result, Jefferson was a top-heavy district in which the few individuals in the highest-level positions held virtually all of the power. Unfortunately, these individuals did not use this power to make the district more inclusive or to interrupt long-established racial hierarchies.

## **B. "Blessed and Highly Favored": Hand-Picked Hires and The Great Passover**

From 2008-2011 the primary way in which administrative positions in the district were filled was by appointing a handpicked internal candidate on an interim basis, and then making their appointment permanent after a few months—usually without an official job search ever taking place. The appointment of the superintendent and the school-level administrators were striking examples of this practice, which not only

solidified the hierarchical power structure of the district, but also created a racially stratified.

### **1. Superintendents and Administrators**

Prior to being appointed interim superintendent, the superintendent of Jefferson Schools was simultaneously appointed interim principal of Jefferson High School and Jefferson Middle School. In February of 2008, she was tapped to be the acting superintendent of the district after the previous superintendent resigned. In June of 2008, she was hired by the board as the permanent superintendent. She was the only candidate interviewed for the position. She served as superintendent for three and a half years from February 2008 through June of 2011, at which point she retired.

During the time of this study, this model of promoting white staff from within happened multiple times. The principal from August 2008-January 2011 was a white man who had worked in the district for over 30 years as a teacher. He was appointed interim principal of the high school by the superintendent—who had previously been his principal. Like the superintendent, he had no experience in educational leadership or administration prior to his appointment. In the Fall of 2009, he was permanently given the position.

His appointment was also highly controversial, in large part because he had initially been on the hiring committee. Many of the staff at the high school felt that he too was unqualified for this position. Not only did he have limited experience as an administrator, he was perceived as lacking the strength of personality to stand up to the superintendent and the school board. Many saw him as a puppet of the larger institution. According to one staff member, he was so timid he was “scared of his own shadow.” He also admitted feeling overwhelmed by the position. It seemed to him that the school was almost always in crisis—giving him little time to proactively address much of anything, especially issues of diversity and multiculturalism. Instead, he was in what he called a constant state of “triage,” just trying to put out fires and make it through each day.

At the beginning of the 2010-2011 school year, the Superintendent and Executive Director of Human Resources, an African American man, announced they would both be retiring. Now in a permanent position, the principal of Jefferson High School was tapped

to replace the HR Director. The white male Assistant Principal, who had been in the position less than three years, was appointed interim principal for the remainder of the year—a decision that was not discussed with the black female assistant principal who had worked in the district for over three decades, and who had been an Assistant Principal longer.

In his early 40s, the new principal of Jefferson was a former athlete and coach. He had a booming voice accompanied by a massive size. He towered above most of the staff and students in the school and could be heard coming a mile away. While some found him to be intimidating upon first meeting, he had a kind heart and was able to connect easily with students from a range of backgrounds. Many of the staff were particularly impressed by his ability to connect with black and low-income students. Because he had grown up in the area, he knew many of the families of his students and was easily able to throw out names of cousins, uncles, and grandmothers to get a student who was in trouble in line. He could often be heard saying things like, “What would your Auntie so-and-so think of you sitting down here in my office?” to students he was disciplining.

Most staff were not surprised by his appointment as principal. Not only did it align with the larger trend of promotion in the district, even before it was announced that there would be a vacancy in the principalship, many teachers repeatedly said they believed he was being groomed to be the next school leader. Unlike his predecessor, most of the staff found him to be competent and innovative. Nonetheless, (black) staff, from custodians to administrators, were upset by the process through which he was given the position—a process that was once again clandestine and failed to provide opportunities for black promotion. In 2011, he was hired as the full-time principal. Once again, no search for the position took place and a potential black female candidate was not considered.

Appointments of this nature happened over and over again at multiple schools in the district. By the end of the 2010-2011 school year, the administrative team of JHS had gotten whiter. By the fall of 2011, there were five new administrators in the high school and middle school—all white women appointed through non-transparent processes.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> One of the two black female principals had left and been replaced by a new hire, a white female. A white female teacher from JHS was promoted to a new position, Dean of Students, which was intended to deal

While these new positions were not nearly as controversial as the principals' there was still a belief that they were facilitated by personal relationships.

According to Wolcott (1973), this method of hiring and promotion of administrative staff was not unique. He found that principals were often granted their positions through the sponsorship of a superior who found them to be promising, and through their own efforts to get the attention of someone who might be able to advocate on their behalf. His in-depth study of an elementary school principal found that being “temporarily” given a position was a method of getting one’s foot in the door more permanently. However, this method of hiring and promotion not only limited the opportunities for staff of color, it also created an unstable climate in which inexperienced people were continually moved up the chain. A white male teacher who had worked in the district for 20 years, claimed in 2009 that he had worked for 17 different principals—18 by the time my fieldwork concluded.

In theory, the practice of promoting employees from within was not problematic. In fact, it could have been done in a way that innovatively tapped into the resources, strengths, and skills already present in the district. However, when a primarily white institution—with practices that do not encourage the hiring of candidates of color—relies solely upon handpicked, internal promotions to fill open positions, it becomes impossible to create a more diverse staff. As one black staff member observed, “Black folks have to apply for stuff, they’re put through hoops, and they still aren’t hired. White folks just get appointed” (Fieldnote 3.1.11). Another African American employee who had worked in the district for decades, explained the hiring practices in the following way:

They appoint white men. They give them favor. Black females have to apply, interview, and still don’t get hired. [The black female assistant principals], the time they’ve been here, they should be running this school. But that’s not how it

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with student discipline. In addition, another white female teacher was given a newly created position of At-Risk Intervention Specialist, which was intended to address the unique needs of marginalized students in the school. This teacher was known among students and staff as someone who struggled to connect with African American male students. At the beginning of the 2011-2012 school year she was appointed Assistant Principal. A white female counselor who also had a reputation among staff for struggling to connect with students, was appointed the new At-Risk Specialist. The white female assistant principal who was hired in 2010-2011 was also hired through a process that the administrators at the time said they had virtually no information about. In 2011-2012, she was appointed principal of the Middle School. A white female teacher from the high school was appointed her assistant principal—a decision that once again overlooked a black female teacher in the middle school who held an educational leadership degree and had been interested in an administrative position for years.

works here, they don't interview, they don't hire. They appoint. And they are not giving favor to black people.... There's no democratic process.

This employee believed the dearth of black people on the school board made it virtually impossible for black staff in the district to move up:

Now there are no black people on the school board. When [a black man] was on the school board, it was a great day! A great day! A lot of the things they used to do they couldn't do anymore. Just his presence there made a huge difference. He could ask. But now there's no one at the table...to offset all those illegal meetings they have over the phone to pre-make decisions before the meeting.

While it is impossible to guess how the board viewed their methods of promotion, to black, and racially conscious white staff, it was an overt manifestation of the structural racism of the district. White people were given favor by nature of their whiteness and as a result of the connections that whiteness facilitated. As Hebdige (1979) notes, in our society, "some groups have more say, more opportunity to make the rules, to organize meaning, while others are less favourably placed, have less power to produce and impose their definitions of the world" (p. 14). The general sentiment at Jefferson was that black staff—even the administrators—did not have such opportunities.

The ways in which favor was denied to black staff in the district was not only relevant in terms of how black employees interpreted these appointments, but also with regard to how the white staff viewed their promotions. The two white men who were consecutively appointed principal were very open with me in our initial meetings, about the need to think about diversity in more proactive ways. One in particular often talked about his frustration with the district regarding their failure to hire more teachers from marginalized backgrounds. He believed there were qualified teachers from non-white and non-middle-class backgrounds graduating from schools of education in the area, but Jefferson simply did not reach out or was not attractive to them. Ultimately, he viewed the lack of diversity among teachers as a disservice to the students.

Nonetheless, these white men did not openly discuss their own appointments as a part of the larger trend in the district of overlooking qualified staff of color. However, other staff brought it up. When asked if these administrators understood the ways in which they were a part of a larger system of inequality, a long-term black staff member gave a look of incredulity, "What?! No! They're undeserving. They earned it. They're

avored. They aren't even thinking about the fact that [the Black female administrator] wasn't even considered, wasn't asked, wasn't interviewed, nothing. They aren't even thinking about that she's been here 30 years. They aren't even thinking about that." In a district with a top-heavy power structure, in which a few school board members, in collaboration with the superintendent, could enact a vision of the school that suppressed reality, administrators were unable or unwilling to take risks, to shake things up, or challenge the status quo—especially if the status quo was their own appointment.

## **2. “But Isn’t the HR Director Black?”: Teacher Hiring and Diversity**

Like most public schools in the United States, over 90% of Jefferson teachers were white women, from middle-class backgrounds.<sup>26</sup> There is a pipeline issue regarding teacher diversity that permeates schools far beyond Jefferson. Nonetheless, there was a sentiment that the district had done a particularly poor job in recruiting, hiring, and retaining African American teachers. Four different black staff members

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<sup>26</sup> During the first year of my research (2009-2010), only 3 of the teachers at Jefferson High School were black and one teacher was Indian. Two teachers at the school identified as half Mexican during interviews, but read as white and were often assumed to be white by their students and colleagues. During the second year (2010-2011), 4 of the teachers were African American. The additional African American teacher had been transferred from the middle school where he had worked for decades. In turn, this hire did not add to the overall teachers of color in the district. The Indian and Mexican teachers remained on staff. The rest of the teachers in the building were white. Interestingly, in addition to these teachers, multiple teachers in the building had Spanish last names. However, all of these teachers had acquired their names through marriage and identified as white. All of the African American teachers had worked in the district for over a decade. In turn, there had not been any new African American hires (or at least any that lasted), in over a decade.

African American staff included both of the community assistants who served largely as hallway monitors and disciplinarians, one of the four school secretaries, two of the seven cafeteria monitors, two of the five daytime custodians, and one of the permanent technology staff. The long-term In-School Suspension (ISS) substitute teachers were also African American. Finally, four of the paraprofessionals were people of color—one African American man who worked with the contained special education students, two black women, and one Latina woman. In addition to black staff, there were also two Latino male custodians. As was pointed out, during the 2009-2010 school year, two of the three assistant principals were black women. During the 2010-2011 school year, one of the two assistant principals was a black woman, and the Executive Director of Human Resources was a black man. In addition, prior to this study, from 2006-2008, the principal of Jefferson High School was a black man.

While the large majority of the teachers in the district, and in the high school, were white, the other school staff was more racially diverse. Of 902 total staff in the district, 127 identified as people of color (Black, Asian, Latino, and American Indian or Alaskan Native). When looked at in terms of numbers alone, there were actually a significant number of staff of color at Jefferson High School. However, these staff were disproportionately represented in non-instructional positions, substitute teaching positions, and in para-professional positions.

independently reported that the applicant pool in the district was more diverse than the district let on, but that these applicants had never been contacted or given interviews. The hiring practices in the district were so problematic there were claims that the district was under investigation by a national civil rights organization.

Table 3.1 STAFF BY RACE JEFFERSON SCHOOL DISTRICT

YEAR	TEACHERS				
	Black	White	Asian	Hispanic/Latino	Total
2007	19 (5.7%)	305 (92%)	2 (0.6%)	5 (1.5%)	331
2008	16 (4.9%)	305 (93%)	2 (0.6%)	5 (1.5%)	327
2009	14 (4.5%)	290 (93.5%)	1 (0.3%)	5 (1.6%)	310
2010	15 (5.0%)	279 (93%)	1 (0.3%)	5 (1.6%)	300
	ADMINISTRATORS				
	Black	White	Asian	Hispanic/Latino	Total
2007	5 (20%)	20 (80%)	0	0	25
2008	7 (27%)	19 (73%)	0	0	26
2009	5 (22%)	18 (78%)	0	0	23
2010	4 (17%)	19 (82%)	0	0	23
	PARAPROFESSIONAL AIDES				
	Black	White	Asian	Hispanic/Latino	Total
2007	5 (5.9%)	76 (90%)	1 (1%)	2 (2.4%)	84
2008	6 (7.2%)	74 (89%)	1 (1%)	2 (2.4%)	83
2009	5 (6.3%)	72 (90%)	1 (1%)	2 (2.5%)	80
2010	7 (9.2%)	66 (87%)	1 (1%)	2 (2.6%)	76

State Department of Education

The lack of racial diversity in teaching staff was particularly interesting in light of the fact that the Executive Director of Human Resources, was a black man. When asked how it was possible that a black man in charge of hiring did not manage to hire more black staff, teachers and other staff said that he was an “Uncle Tom,” unwilling to put himself on the line for other potential staff of color. As one black staff member explained:

I would send black folks, Jefferson grads, to [the HR director] for jobs, to teach. Good people! Great people! I would tell him, they are great, great teachers. And they would never even get called for an interview. [He] would say, “Well that’s up to the building principals”—always passing the ball. I said to him, “Someone at the top needs to say it!” If people at the top don’t change, then it won’t happen. You have to step outside of their comfort zone. You have to say, “I want this person because they’re black and it matters for our diversity and our community.” But no one here will say that. [He] wouldn’t. He was too busy trying not to stir the pot....He was black but he didn’t want to put himself out for anyone

else....That's why I had issues with him. He didn't see this as a social justice project.

As his words reveal, black bodies alone were not enough to interrupt reproductive and unjust systems of racial hierarchy if they did not see their jobs as a "social justice project." While the HR director did nothing to increase the numbers of staff of color in the district, the trend of not hiring black teachers existed long before his arrival. A black staff person said they had personally talked to the former superintendent about the lack of staff diversity:

No, there aren't black teachers in the school still. I talked to [the former superintendent] when he hired 19 new staff and no black staff. Then the next year they hired 18 or 19 more, no black. But there's nothing wrong with that. It's just the norm, right? Where we are with the absence of Affirmative Action, we don't have to. We don't have to hire black teachers.

This employee felt strongly that without having a mandate to do so, the district would never address the lack of racial diversity among staff because to them there was "nothing wrong."

These instances illuminate the ways in which color-mute approaches ultimately served to reinscribe the status quo of racial hierarchies and marginalization among staff. It is likely that the superintendents, school board, and other folks on the hiring committees throughout the years did not consider themselves to be purposefully denying opportunities to people of color. In fact, it is likely that they did not think about race much at all when making these decisions. However, by muting race as a point of consideration, they created a climate in which it was not possible to increase staff diversity. In other words, when race is not considered at an institutional level the likely outcome is that school staff will remain virtually all white.

According to staff, the few black teachers who had been hired, often had negative experiences. During my time at the school I heard of black teachers filing law suits against the district, black teachers being fired for unsubstantiated accusations, and black teachers quitting at the first opportunity to work in another district. While the flesh of these stories remained obscure, it was clear that there had historically been hostile relationships between the district and black employees. These tensions permeated every aspect of work-life for black employees. Unfortunately, those who had real power in the

district either did not know or did not care about the ways in which their practices created a racially homogenous staff and encouraged deep racial fissures based on perceptions that black people were being purposefully overlooked.

### **3. The Bass: The Role of Black Staff**

To many of the white employees, the presence of black people in high-level positions in the district served to discredit Black employees' claims of structural racism. They did not understand how it was possible for the district to be "racist" if so many of the people in charge were black. They were unaware of the actual powers vested in and denied to these black staff.

Similar to most high schools, all three of Jefferson's Assistant Principals spent the majority of their days talking to students who had been written up by their teachers and deciding how they would be disciplined. One of the black Assistant Principals had worked in the district for over 30 years as a teacher and administrator. She had grown up near Jefferson and raised her children, now grown, in the area. She was a calm and quiet woman who was easy to talk to and was well liked by staff. She cared deeply about the students at Jefferson and worked hard to do what was best for them. Although she had an easy and infectious smile, she was also very serious about the educational crisis at Jefferson High School and in the nation more broadly. Never one to engage in gossip or conversation that might be deemed politically incorrect or morally questionable, she repeatedly told me that if I kept my eyes open I would see the truth—a truth she felt the district needed to face about itself around issues of race and class. She rarely revealed these things herself.

The second black female Assistant Principal was also middle-aged and had been in the field of education for the majority of her adult life. A decade before, she had been hired by the Jefferson district as an Assistant Principal. Despite the constant turnover of principals in the district, and her desire to be promoted, she remained an Assistant Principal until she left the district at the end of the 2009-2010 school year, to take a Principal position in another district. Unlike her colleague, she was open about the racial tensions in the district and spoke easily about the ways in which she personally felt her skills, knowledge and experience were underappreciated. In particular, she felt she had to

hide the fact that, like me, she was working on her Ph.D. She said the superintendent and school board were threatened by anyone who might be more qualified for their jobs—anyone who might encroach on their power—especially a black woman. As a result of the politics in the Jefferson district, she was the only student in her graduate cohort who was not partnered with an administrator in their district to shadow.

A number of adults in the building, particularly the African American staff members, felt it was no accident that in a primarily white-run district, two of the school’s three assistant principals were black women and one was a domineering white man. They believed these individuals had been very strategically hired because they were considered capable of “dealing with” black students and their families, who were perceived as more likely to cause trouble. As one staff member put it, “those women were given those jobs to handle black kids and their parents, because these white folks don’t know what to do with them.” Black administrators were sought out to “discipline” black students, and “deal with” black families, but were expected to “stay in their place.”

The disciplinary trends in the district provided support for this claim. As in most public schools, Black students at Jefferson were disproportionately suspended and expelled (A. A. Ferguson, 2000; A. Gregory, Noguera, & Skiba, 2010; Noguera, 2008). In 2006-2007, while black students made up only 32% of the high school, they made up 47% of suspensions. In 2006-2007, 51% of black students at Jefferson High School had been suspended at some point in their high school career, compared to only 27% of white students. In addition, of the 37 long-term suspensions and expulsions from 2005-2008, 54% were black students.

Table 3.2 SUSPENSIONS BY RACE 2006-2007  
JEFFERSON SCHOOL DISTRICT

	DISTRICT		HIGH SCHOOL	
	% of population	% of suspensions	% of population	% of suspensions
Black students	33%	52.00%	32%	47%
White students	63%	44.80%	64%	50%

Some staff believed these trends were the result of the fact that black students were simply more poorly behaved than their white counterparts. However, as Foucault (1995) notes, “...it is society that defines, in its own interests, what must be regarded as crime: it

is not, therefore natural” (p. 104). Black students were not inherently more deserving of punishment. Rather, the ways in which students and teachers criminalized certain behaviors disproportionately targeted the bodies of black students (Foucault, 1995).

The staff responsible for controlling black bodies went beyond the administration. The two community assistants, who dealt primarily with discipline in the hallways, were African American men, as were the two long-term ISS substitutes. Combined, these administrators and staff made up the face of discipline and authority within the school. A black staff member explained it in the following way:

It’s no accident that the ISS folks, the community folks, are black. They’re not educators, they’re here to control. To be the heavy. ISS, we want to keep a black person there....That’s our bouncer, our school bully....They always want to make the black person in charge of the kids they can’t control.

According to him, the tendency to use black authority to control students was not a new phenomenon. Instead, he witnessed the same thing happen two decades before when there was a black male Assistant Principal:

In 13 years they never let him advance. They brought in the elementary school principal to be principal of the high school. Someone who had never even been in a high school. This district was actively looking for bass—Assistant Principals to deal with discipline—but they never let them advance. I told him, you can’t just be a bouncer or a bully. You have to discipline with love. He was the bully in this school, and eventually it took a toll on his health. It really affected him physically.

Although no longer acting as “bullies”, almost all of the black staff at the school, from custodians to administrators, felt the weight of working in such a place. Because there were so few of them, they were in very high demand by students of color, and clueless white colleagues in need of support. Black staff were bombarded from the time they entered the building to the moment they left. Even black custodians could be seen giving counsel and encouragement to black students throughout the day.

Feeling such a responsibility at the same time as they also felt powerless to make change, proved detrimental to most black staff, who were, on the whole, overwhelmed with the demands of their job in light of the racial hostility they faced. One black staff member who had been in the district for many years said that, in reflecting on their time, they felt “ashamed” that they did not do more to change the racial culture in the district and to create a more socially just school system. When asked why they had not done

more, they responded: “There was only so much time in a day. I am stretched so thin with (black) students coming to me, with (black) parents coming to me, with them needing to be around me, needing to see my face, there was not enough time to do more.”

While there were a number of black faces in the district in high-level positions, they served as surface representations of diversity and were ultimately vested, with no real power. It is clear that schools needed to be concerned not just with numbers, but also with whether or not the voices of staff of color are heard or silenced, whether or not they have access to decision-making power, and whether or not they (and their white counterparts) view their position as a part of a larger social justice project.

While it was unfortunate that the black staff did not have more power to change the racial climate of the district, this should not have been their responsibility alone. White administrators should have been just as invested in creating a diverse staff and just hiring practices in the district. However, the white male administrators who touted the importance of diversity did not manage to hire any new faculty of color during their tenure. Because white staff were not more invested in these issues, there were all kinds of racial tensions and hostilities among adults in the building, that interrupted their abilities to serve diverse groups of students effectively.

#### **4. Legacy of a Big Black Man: How “Diversity” Worsened Race Relations**

In 2006, Jefferson High School hired a black male principal, Mr. Williams. His two-year tenure caused such controversy that when I arrived to begin fieldwork his name was still being invoked to explain the complex race relations among adults in the district. Unlike most Jefferson administrators, Mr. Williams was an “outsider” recruited from a small urban district in the state. He interviewed in front of a multi-person panel and was unanimously hired for the position. In retrospect, Williams—who was 6’2” and 235lbs—believed the district assumed they were “getting a big black man to come scare the black kids,” when they hired him. “They wanted me to come out here and put the black kids in their place,” he said. However, using data as a guide, he says he took a different approach than what was expected. He worked to clearly communicate expectations to teachers, implemented zero tolerance for fighting, and listened to students. While Mr. Williams felt his methods would improve the school’s effectiveness with a wider range of students,

some of the teachers had a different opinion: “They didn’t want that. They wanted an authoritarian style of government. They wanted to use old lesson plans. They didn’t want to have to do anything new.”

In part, the high turnover of administrators had made many teachers distrustful of new principals with radical agendas. Almost annually they had dealt with new approaches and curricular changes—the bright ideas of charismatic individuals who never lasted more than two years. Many felt that Mr. Williams was doing too much too soon, without first taking the time to understand the unique needs of the school and the unique history of the area. While some staff members saw his efforts as successfully moving toward addressing the needs of their increasingly diverse student population, others felt that he gave special treatment to “young” teachers and that he ultimately made race relations significantly worse in the school.

By 2009, teachers were using language like, “outsider,” “change,” “favoritism,” and “difference” as proxies for race when talking about Williams. Some admitted that they perceived him to be engaging in reverse racism—giving preference to black students and black staff. One example often given was that black students were allowed to “walk right into his office and talk to him” if they wanted to. A number of teachers reported that he let black students get away with problematic behavior that white students could not (Fieldnotes 12.15.09).<sup>27</sup> A few even went as far as to blame the racial segregation of student cafeterias on the Williams administration.

Williams balked at the suggestion that he had shown any kind of preferential treatment, although he admitted that he too had heard the rumors: “People said I would go up to kids and say, ‘What up dawg?’ ‘What up homeboy?’ That’s just not true.” He believed white teachers were using their own racial biases to filter their assessments of his interactions with black students in ways that ultimately misrepresented his behavior and his intentions. In fact, Williams said he “felt more appreciated by white parents. I felt like I acknowledged *all* kids. I think they’d be hard pressed to provide evidence otherwise. I went to the front door and greeted every child who came in the building. I

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<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, disciplinary data suggests otherwise. Black students were much more likely than white students to be suspended and expelled at Jefferson.

acknowledge their existence! Kids feel invisible because the adults ignore them. I told teachers on hallway duty to establish relationships with students.”

Williams said prior to his arrival (and arguably after he left) there was no acknowledgement in the district of the particular needs of low-income students or students of color. He touted significant improvements in the school by the time he left: “I’m a big data guy and looked at the data before, during and after, my tenure. The suspension data speaks to it. There were 87 fights the year before I came, 10 my first year, 3 after school. I created the conditions that allowed students to walk away without being a punk. I gave them an out.” In addition, he said, there were only 6 expulsion hearings during his tenure, down from 26 before he came. He said that prior to hiring him, “They were expelling kids for no reason because these parents had no advocacy. The [district] trumped up charges and the parents didn’t know.” As statewide reports on discipline have revealed, these expulsions disproportionately targeted black students. He believed that much of resistance he faced was due to the fact that he brought issues of race and class to the forefront—that he dared to “address the elephant in the room.” He felt this made him a target.

Ultimately, Mr. Williams says he left the district because of “fit.” He wanted to address many of the issues Jefferson faced—issues that were similar to those in urban schools where he had worked—and he believed the Jefferson power structure demonized him for it. According to Mr. Williams, it was Jefferson that had the race issues, not him. He said, “I’ve worked in 4 different school districts, and I’ve never seen a functional school board. Nationally we don’t have the answers to the education system.” But Jefferson was by far, “the worst place I ever worked in my life. It wasn’t about the kids. The kids were incredible. It was a klan—very different.” He went on to say that Jefferson was the most racist place he had ever encountered.

The Williams administration prompted significant racial hostilities among adults in the district that lingered long after his departure. It was in him and his legacy that many in the school located the source of “the race problem.” The divisiveness was not only racial, it was the new guard against the old, those who were trying to retain “the Jefferson Way” against those who knew it was already over. Arguably, it was Williams’ tenure that facilitated the appointment of his successors—both of whom were picked in a

very different way. Teachers' analyses of the ramifications of having a black principal illuminated a dominant narrative in the school of reverse racism in which people of color, rather than biased hiring practices, top heavy hierarchical structures, or white racism, were responsible for racial tensions. Left unsaid was that when white people ran the school they perceived there to be no race problem. They assumed that white leaders were inherently unbiased in ways that black leaders were not. It did not occur to them that white students and teachers had been given unfair advantages all of the years prior to Williams' tenure and all the years following. Instead, race was an issue only when a black person raised it as one.

### **C. Data and Deception: Using Numbers to Obscure Reality**

Between 1990 and 2010, the size and demographic make-up of the Jefferson School District rapidly transformed. However, accurate data reflecting these changes was hard to come by. Despite federal mandates to disaggregate test score data by subgroup, including race and economic status, in practice, teachers and administrators had limited access to accurate demographic, achievement, disciplinary, and enrollment data. There was a strong sense among many JHS staff that this was no accident. Instead, they viewed the limited reporting as part of a larger culture of silence in which truths that were seen as unfavorable were suppressed—especially those related to the student population and the quality of education at the school. Staff members told me they thought the district had concealed, failed to collect, and in some cases, knowingly falsified data.<sup>28</sup>

Early in my research, I asked various school leaders how I could go about getting access to achievement and disciplinary data for the school, in order to support my qualitative and ethnographic research. My inquiries were repeatedly met with a resigned

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<sup>28</sup> The lack of accessible and accurate data was not unique to JHS. Instead, the current reform climate makes data manipulation not just tempting, but almost unavoidable. The sanctions for schools who fail to meet state and national standards have become so severe and the resources to successfully meet these standards have become so limited that school leaders who work in districts with larger numbers of low-income students and students of color are placed in an impossible position—one in which not only their schools, but also their jobs, are on the line. Recently, the dangers of these pressures have been brought to public attention. For example, in the past two years, many schools and districts across the nation have been accused of suppressing and falsifying test score, graduation, and achievement data (Maxwell, 2006, Turque, 2011). It is likely that many more have actually engaged in such behavior.

amusement that indicated much about the culture of the district. One staff member responded, “There’s no access to data here. It *is not* disseminated....They might give it to you if you sacrifice your first born child!” (Fieldnote 11.20.09). The limited access to data became especially obvious during an all-day Professional Development seminar, run by a consultant from another state flown in for the day. The seminar focused on how schools could engage in evidence-based practice by using data to develop plans of action. The facilitator asked for a number of reports to use as baseline data for the workshop, which the school administrators were unable to provide. Two administrators were standing outside the session discussing their inability to provide it:

*Administrator 1:* I’m embarrassed, because she keeps asking, “Do you do this?” “Do you do that?” and I’m like, “No.”

*Administrator 2:* Don’t be embarrassed. It’s the truth, we cannot hide from the truth. (Fieldnote 11.20.09)

As this excerpt reveals, administrators were aware of what was happening in the district and of how it negatively impacted their abilities to effect change in their schools. Moreover, they claimed to be unafraid of the truth coming to light. Nonetheless, their individual desires did not seem to have any sway with the upper-level administrators who served as informational gatekeepers. Even administrators were not given access to pertinent data about their own schools, nor did they take the initiative to disaggregate it themselves. Two particularly poignant examples highlighted the ways in which data was handled in the district. The first was regarding the reporting of socio-economic data to the state and the reluctance of the district to apply for Title I status for the high school. The second involved the district’s inclusion in “Best Schools in the State” television news special.

## **1. SES and Title I**

According to the State Department of Education (SDE), during 2007-2008 and 2008-2009, less than 13% of students were reported economically disadvantaged at Jefferson High School. Similarly, citing data from the National Center for Educational Statistics, Great Schools—a website that ranks public and private schools across the nation—reported only 10% of JHS students were eligible for free or reduced lunch in

2008-2009. These numbers greatly contrasted with Jefferson's internal documents. In September of 2009, administrators gave me a printout that said 31% of students at the high school qualified for free or reduced lunch. When I asked about the disparity between the school's numbers, and those reported at the state level, they were unaware it existed, but were insistent that they had significant numbers of students who were from low-income families. Upon closer investigation I discovered that, for the two years in question, the school reported no students qualifying for reduced lunch—an unlikely scenario. A year later the numbers of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch had increased by 30%, growing from 13% to 43%, where it remained for the 2010-2011 school year as well.

While some argued that the lack of organization in the district, and the dearth of a good “data person,” had led to the mistake, others saw the missing data as indicative of a larger trend in the district to sweep under the rug the increasing numbers of low-income students. As one staff member put it, the limited access to and reporting of data was a direct result of the fact that, “They don't want to be known as a Title I school” (Fieldnote 11.20.09).

Title I is a section of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (now known as the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*) meant to “ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments.” More specifically, it is focused on “improving the academic achievement of the disadvantaged” (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). One of the ways in which the federal government seeks to achieve this goal is by allocating additional funds to schools with significant populations of low-income students.

Title I schools are provided with enhanced financial resources to use at their discretion, in order to close the academic achievement gap and provide disadvantaged students with opportunities they would not have otherwise. However, status as a Title I school comes with a stigma. Title I schools are almost always low-achieving when compared to other schools in the state and nation. In addition, most Title I schools not only have high rates of low-income students, they also have high numbers of students of

color—a racialized and classed status that JHS staff believed the district, run by small town white folks, would go out of its way to avoid.

A conversation with a JHS administrator put the reluctance of the district to honestly address the student population in context:

I'm of the belief that we have to address the needs of the population we have. I have to be very careful about how I say this. Some people, higher up, they want us to be like [higher income suburban districts in the area with majority white populations] and want to ignore the fact that we are not like them. They want to not see our population. But that's why we have local schools rather than state-wide—so we can address the specific needs of our community, which we should, because it's ours. (Fieldnote 1.19.10)

The difference between the goals and desires of Jefferson High School administrators, when it came to Title I status, and those of the upper-level district administrators was striking. While Jefferson administrators thought of the increased numbers of low-income and African American students as a part of their “community”—one they had the responsibility for educating—the upper level administration viewed these students and families as potentially tainting the broader perception of who the Jefferson community included. They did not want to be known as a poor black school. When I concluded fieldwork in 2011, although the state report of economically disadvantaged students was more accurate, and clearly signaled that JHS qualified for federal assistance, the school still was not utilizing Title I resources.

## **2. Best Schools in the State & School Choice**

In late 2009 the Jefferson School District was featured in a local news special highlighting the best school districts in the State. The half-hour special gave viewers a window into the unique programs and opportunities available in nine school districts. The day after the special aired, teachers at JHS were abuzz. They said many of the highlights aired were untrue. Word had also spread that the district was not selected for inclusion in the special based on merit, but had paid \$25,000 to be part of it. As the following exchange suggests, many teachers were enraged that the district had gone to such lengths:

*Teacher:* The school is just lying about itself and lying about the programs! The show said that we have a pre-engineering track, that we teach Mandarin and have lots of AP classes—those are just lies! We don't have an engineering program!

We don't have Mandarin! They *paid* to get on that show! It's in the school board minutes.

*Shayla:* Why would they do that?

*Teacher:* The superintendent wants to look good in the press because good press will help increase enrollment. If parents think we have an engineering program they'll send their kids here. (Fieldnotes 12.15.09)

Within a few weeks, local news articles emerged blasting the districts included, for their decision to pay for the spot. Representatives from other area school districts that had turned down the offer to participate said they “felt it bordered on the line morally and ethically.” However, according to one article, the JHS superintendent and school board saw it as a creative way to use media to highlight the strengths of the district. Moreover, they said they could use the footage after the special for PR. Teachers in the building disagreed. They saw the special as yet another instance in which the district was problematically manipulating data.

In many ways Jefferson's decision to spend funds on the ad spot was a part of a larger reform agenda in the state and the nation rooted in the assumption that schools should be run more like businesses, and that “choice” is inherent to the solution for academic failure, particularly for students who are most marginalized. This market-based approach treats education like a product to be sold to consumers—in this case students and their families. As a result, there have been significant efforts at the federal and state levels to expand school choice options through increased charter schools and open-enrollment policies, which allow students to attend schools outside of their districts. For over 15 years the State has had fairly liberal school of choice policies. *Section 105 of the School Aid Act of 1979*, added in 1995, allows for students within an intermediate school district to choose to attend schools outside of their neighborhood, assuming space is available in their school of choice. In 1999, the policy was broadened to include cross-*ISD* open-enrollment. In turn, students in the state can now choose to go to schools in other districts that have choice programs.

These laws were motivated, at least in part, by changes to school finance law, which linked funding to pupil enrollment, rather than local property taxes. As a result, there is now significant financial incentive to increase district enrollment. This creates a

cycle in which schools in District A become schools of choice and start siphoning off students from District B. In turn, District B has to become a choice district so that they can attract students from District C to replace the funds lost from the students who moved to District A. This cycle is hierarchical, with districts perceived to be “better” continually attracting students away from those perceived to be worse.<sup>29</sup> As a result of these policies there is significant financial pressure on districts to retain students living in their communities and to recruit students from other areas.

The decision of Jefferson to pay money to be featured as one of the top schools, and their reluctance to be recognized as a Title I school, is very much the result of these larger political pressures. In 2008, Jefferson High School became a school of choice. While Jefferson was not the highest achieving school in the area, it was perceived as a higher achieving school than the two high schools closest to it, which also had higher populations of black students. Arguably, there is a strong connection between high numbers of black students and perceptions of school quality. During the 2008-2009, 2009-2010, and 2010-2011 school years over 100 students annually chose to attend Jefferson district schools from other areas.

Table 3.3 SCHOOL OF CHOICE STUDENTS JEFFERSON HIGH SCHOOL<sup>30</sup>

SCHOOL YEAR	# OF STUDENTS FROM OTHER DISTRICTS	% OF STUDENT POPULATION
2008-2009	105	2.2%
2009-2010	138	2.88%
2010-2011	129	2.82%
Total <i>Possible</i> in District	372*	8.12%*

Jefferson School District School Board Minutes

<sup>29</sup> The Republican governor, who took office in January of 2011, has proposed expanding the policy even further to include state-wide schools of choice. If passed, students could decide to go to any school in the state if they have space. In addition, in December 2011 the State Legislature voted to revoke the cap on charter schools in the State, creating even more competition among districts for students.

The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* further expanded school choice options. If schools fail to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) they have to provide students with the opportunity to attend a higher achieving school. They are encouraged to make arrangements with public charters as well as schools outside of the district if need be to fulfill this responsibility. Jefferson High School failed AYP multiple years in a row before the 2010-2011 school year, and was placed on the list of Persistently Low Achieving schools in the 2011-2012 school year. The schools surrounding Jefferson had even longer histories of AYP failure. In turn, it has been estimated that thousands of students in the region are taking advantage of choice options.

<sup>30</sup> “Total *Possible* in District” is an estimation of the maximum possible number of choice students in the district if all of these students remained at Jefferson after their admission and none graduated by the time of this study. It is very unlikely that all of these students were actually enrolled at the time of this study.

While data was not available for the race, gender and socioeconomic status of these students because many of the schools these students came from were more heavily African American and lower-income than Jefferson, staff believed that school of choice students were more likely to be black and poor.<sup>31</sup> However, like much in the district, these beliefs are not based on actual data. Instead, when asked how many students were in the district by choice and what the demographic make-up of that group was, teachers and administrators gave various responses from “I don’t know,” to inaccurate guesses.

According to the numbers, the percentage of black students in the school only grew by one percent from 2007, the year before choice, to 2008, the first year of choice, indicating that the racial shifts they were witnessing were not the result of school of choice policies alone. Nonetheless, this dominant narrative allowed for teachers and administrators to blame their problems with African American students on “class” and “culture,” rather than race and allowed a culture to flourish in which teachers distinguished between “us” and “them,” “outsiders” and “insiders,” those “white” students who actually lived in the district, and those “black” students who did not. Ultimately, many people believed that the poor and black students they imagined were coming to the school were not, and should not be, a part of their community. Ironically, these imagined students were also those whom the district was seeking out for financial security. Black and low-income students were “good enough” to use for increased state funding, but not “good enough” for the district to risk the stigma of Title I status in order to provide them with adequate resources.

### **3. A Culture of Transparency and Support?: Implications of Inaccurate Data**

Despite the ways in which data was obscured in the district, the Superintendent, made public claims about “transparency.” In December of 2009 she hosted a district-wide meeting to discuss the financial strain the district was facing. About 200 staff attended the meeting. It focused on the cost-saving decision to privatize custodial and transportation services. Throughout the presentation she repeatedly said, “I have nothing

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<sup>31</sup> Because the data for 2007 and 2008 free and reduced lunch qualification was misreported, it is not possible to tell if there was a shift in students’ economic positions after Jefferson became a school of choice.

to hide from you all,” and emphasized the importance of transparency in the district. However, when she provided an opportunity for staff to ask questions, not one Jefferson High School employee raised their hand. In fact, only a few staff from other schools in the district asked anything. The silence in the room was striking. After the meeting I asked two teachers why so many of them had seemed disengaged. One responded, they “didn’t ask anything because we know everything she says is a lie.” In their experience the district was anything but transparent, and so they made little effort to engage in the process. One of the support staff had another analysis of the silence in the room. He claimed that, in general, teachers in the school, like the administrators and superintendent, were conflict-adverse and scared to make waves in the district. Although they complained behind closed doors about serious issues facing the school, they had bought into the culture of silence, even as they criticized it.

The culture of silence in Jefferson, around many issues—especially those regarding race and class—combined with the lack of accessible data, had serious implications for the school. Teachers, administrators, and other staff were unaware of disparities in achievement, graduation, and discipline that fell along lines of race, class and gender.<sup>32</sup> They had limited knowledge of the demographic make-up of the school beyond what they could see and, in turn, often assumed that there were more black students than there actually were (Gallagher, 2003). Moreover, many assumed these students were poorer than they were. Their observations too often proved inaccurate and painted a damaging and stereotypical picture of those students who were already most marginalized in the school. As a result, teachers and administrators could not adequately adjust their practice to address the unique needs of students. Moreover, the lack of data

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<sup>32</sup> State and federal mandated reporting at the district level often does not trickle down to those working on the ground. Most teachers and administrators do not have the time to seek out this kind of information independently. In the state where this research took place, there is no easy way to access the kinds of data that would have been useful for teachers. Although the information is available on the Department of Education website, the data is raw and disaggregated. It takes hours to calculate and analyze the raw data available. In turn, when schools do not readily provide data to their staff, it is unlikely that staff will access it on their own. As a result, much of the state mandated reporting is useful only insofar as it tells the state something about the school. It is not a useful tool for those working in the school to improve education for all students unless individual schools are honest with themselves and make data easily accessible to their staff. When access to such data is not readily available to teachers, it is unrealistic to expect them to take race and class disparities in achievement and discipline into account in their practice.

and transparency created a very problematic dominant narrative in which claims about “demographic shifts,” located in the bodies of black youth, were made to justify larger school failures.

### **III. FAILURE TO INTERRUPT: ENACTING MULTICULTURALISM**

#### **A. Diversity is Our Strength?**

While the Jefferson district, as a whole, was one in which realities of race and class were silenced, the Principal and Assistant Principals openly espoused a multicultural position. In the first meeting I had with administrators, they said cultural diversity was both their biggest asset and their biggest challenge. They acknowledged that the school was changing rapidly and felt the shift could be a wonderful learning opportunity for students. They also knew tensions between students and between students and teachers across difference had caused a lot of conflict in the school. They told me that issues of “culture” were more problematic in the school than physical altercations between students.

However, despite their genuine intellectual commitment to addressing the needs of their student body, in practice their efforts boiled down to a one-liner: “Diversity is our strength.” They were simply unsure of how to go about creating a multicultural school, how to use their diversity as a real strength, or how to address the challenges and conflicts that regularly arose in the school around race and class. Moreover, as a result of the ways in which the system was structured more broadly, they had little real power to enact their goals of creating a more socially just school.

The struggles of Jefferson administrators were not unique. Rather, many scholars have noted the challenges faced by practitioners attempting to create more multicultural schools. They have found that when institutions do make these efforts, they often get stuck in “celebratory,” “managed,” or “mainstream” multiculturalism, which “celebrates cultural pluralism but effects little lasting change for members of the culturally oppressed group” (Hale, 2002). In contrast, many have called for an approach of “critical

multiculturalism”<sup>33</sup> (Gay, 2000; Kanpol & McLaren, 1995; McLaren, 1997; Sleeter, McLaren, & NetLibrary, 1995; Sleeter, 1996) the goal of which is “to challenge oppression and to use schooling as much as possible to shape a future of America that is more equal, democratic and just, and that does not demand conformity to one cultural norm” (Sleeter, 1996, p. 15). This approach requires not only multicultural and socially just practices by individual teachers, but transformation at the systematic level, led by committed administrators and superintendents.

In an effort to translate critical multiculturalism to practitioners, a number of scholars have developed models of K-12 multicultural reform (Banks, 2007; Sleeter & Grant, 1987a; Sleeter, 1992). Merging and adapting these models, Paul Gorski of EdChange.org<sup>34</sup> proposes a five-stage model of multicultural inclusion in schools, the second of which is “celebratory” and the last of which is “critical”:

**Stage one: Curriculum of the Mainstream** in which the school curriculum is focused on the dominant Eurocentric experience. This stage “ignores fully the experiences, voices, contributions, and perspectives of non-dominant...groups.”

**Stage two: Heroes and Holidays** in which multiculturalism is “celebrated” through the inclusion of selective historical figures and holidays, such as Black History Month or Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.

**Stage three: Integration** in which substantive material about non-dominant groups is added to celebrations of heroes and holidays, usually through the additions of specific course offerings or curricular units.

**Stage four: Structural Reform** in which “new materials, perspectives, and voices are woven seamlessly with current frameworks of knowledge to provide new levels of understanding from a more complete and accurate curriculum.”

**Stage five: Multicultural, Social Action, and Awareness** in which “important social issues, including racism, sexism and economic injustice, are addressed explicitly as part of the curriculum.”

Despite these models, at Jefferson, multiculturalism was not being enacted—even at the “celebratory” or “stage two” levels. The stifling influence of the superintendent and school board, and lack of accurate and accessible data, combined with the daily demands

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<sup>33</sup> Dobbie, D., & Richards-Schuster, K. (2008). Building solidarity through difference: A practice model for critical multicultural organizing. *Journal of Community Practice, 16*(3), 317.

<sup>34</sup> Paul Gorski *Stages of Multicultural Curriculum Transformation*  
<http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/curriculum/steps.html>

of their jobs, and administrators' own inexperience in dealing with issues of race and class, presented seemingly insurmountable barriers. The following sections outline the challenges and failures of school administrators to interrupt the system of willful ignorance and enact models of multiculturalism.

### **B. The Cultural Committee and Celebratory Multiculturalism**

The two black administrators were both very interested in issues of race and culture. My shared racial and gender identity, as well as my known interest in culture and diversity made both feel particularly comfortable discussing their interests and frustrations with me. They regularly pulled me aside to explain the ways in which race worked in the district, share their insight regarding what students at the school needed in terms of diversity, or to note the ways in which they felt black students and staff were marginalized in the district.

One gave me copies of “Teaching Tolerance”—a diversity focused educational magazine published by the Southern Poverty Law Center—and showed me other relevant source materials that were in line with the kinds of interests she knew we shared. During these interactions she often said, “This is the kind of stuff we need to be doing here.” or “This will be good for your work.” Nonetheless, the extent of her intervention was passing the information on to me—a researcher and afterschool programmer who was not employed by the school in any official capacity. She did not seem to feel that she was in a position in which she could bring these resources to the teachers in her building in any kind of systematic way.

The other black female administrator took a more active role in addressing diversity. The year before I came to the school she had been a part of a small grassroots movement, known as the Cultural Committee. The group, which included the one black female teacher, the one Indian teacher, a Latina teacher who taught at the middle-school, and one white female teacher who had grown up in primarily black neighborhoods, intended to organize a cultural fair in which students would make various foods from their cultural backgrounds and share them in a taste festival. This event never materialized, primarily because not enough teachers in the building were interested in the

project. One of the committee members explained the reaction of teachers when they presented the idea at a staff meeting:

There were a couple of us and when we presented [in] the faculty meeting, people were not even like accepting. Like we were talking about, this is the committee....We are about to have a celebration for African Americans and Latinos....so that everybody can come together....and nobody asked questions about it. They said, "Okay." So we asked them, anybody [who] wants to come to the meeting can join us.

However, no other teachers took them up on this offer. The committee member said "being on that committee" was when she realized how taboo race was in the district: "People don't want to talk about [race and culture]. Sometimes people get offended...it's negative. So maybe they try to avoid the confrontation. They don't want to talk about it...but I think they should so they understand each other [better]." While the group continued meeting throughout the year, they ultimately decided it would be too much work to hold the event without more support from other staff. By the time I started working at the school, the Cultural Committee had all but dissolved.

It was clear that part of what had happened was that the teachers on the cultural committee struggled with regard to what exactly they should *do*. The group started out wanting to have space to critically engage cultural issues in the school. However, the complexities of this effort eventually led them to the decision that they should take a more celebratory approach to multiculturalism in which they simply displayed the different cultures present in the school through a food festival. In addition, it was clear that the culture of the silence around race in the district did not facilitate support for the project. While no one overtly dissuaded the committee from continuing, their resistance to providing assistance effectively silenced the group. Ultimately, Jefferson was unable to pull off even the most basic multicultural celebration.

### **C. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Black History**

At the same time as a black administrator was trying to sustain a committee of teachers interested in issues of culture, the district was failing to take the most basic steps to acknowledge diversity. In the two years of this study there was never any school-wide celebration, convocation, announcement or acknowledgement of MLK Day, Black History Month, Hispanic Heritage Month, Women's History Month or any other "heroes"

and “holidays” from non-white, non-middle class perspective. While some individual teachers talked about these events in their own classrooms, the school did nothing systematic.

Most every event for Martin Luther King Jr. Day or Black History Month that had taken place in the school in recent history had been organized by the one black female teacher, in collaboration with one of the two black female administrators. The year before the research for this study began, she organized a convocation for Black History Month. However, a significant number of white teachers refused to take their classes to the convocation. One white female teacher said that she went to preview the presentation during her prep hour, and as a white woman she left feeling “completely attacked.” She felt like slavery was blamed on her and her family, and was particular upset because her family had fought in the Civil War to end slavery. As she put it, “My family never owned slaves!” She decided not to take her class to see the presentation (Fieldnote 9.9.09). Others who attended reported that the program was interesting, educational, and no more provocative than any presentation about historical racism in the United States. In turn, this teachers’ reaction was indicative of the depth of resistance of teachers in the school to any thing that required them to think about race or address their own whiteness.

When the black teacher decided she was no longer interested in single-handedly organizing school-wide celebrations, these events no longer occurred. A white female teacher explained:

*Teacher:* I guarantee you, none of those administrators even asked about MLK...because in the past she had done something for Black History Month, but she told me, she’s like, “I will never do anything here again.” So she feels shut down, cut off, unsupported....It should be a school thing. Yeah it should be an administrative [initiative].

*Shayla:* So if she doesn’t do it, it doesn’t get done?

*Teacher:* Right...Right, right. And they’ve talked about...a multicultural group. So who does she bring in? The token Indian woman, you know...[N]othing ever happens. Nothing ever happens.

For many in the school, the fact that no one picked up the ball when the black female teacher stopped organizing these celebrations represented the ultimate failure of the

district to acknowledge race. They were unable to recognize diversity and difference in even the most surface of ways.

Some black staff felt it was risky that they were not doing more to acknowledge racial difference in the district. As one person put it, “Look at what we’re going to do for Black History Month. Nothing! But when the firestorm erupts the white folks will run, the black folks will be militant and mad, and then the littlest thing will be racism, even if it isn’t.” This staff person thought it ironic that while the school district actively ignored the contributions of people of color to the country by failing to recognize Black History Month and Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, they were quick to claim “reverse racism” when race was raised in a way they were uncomfortable with. He felt that the district was handling race so clumsily they were asking for trouble.

#### **D. Opting out of Barack Obama**

At the beginning of the 2009 school year, many public schools in the country were under fire for refusing to air President Obama’s Back to School speech. Media outlets argued that there had never been this kind of national resistance to allowing students to listen to their president and cited his racial background and the underlying racism of many school administrators as the reason for their reluctance. Jefferson was one of these schools.

According to the official story, a number of (white) parents had called, in advance of its airing, to complain about the school showing the speech. In response, the district decided to send permission slips home with students allowing their parents to “opt them out” of the screening. None of the school level administrators I spoke with supported this decision. Some explicitly said this was evidence of the racism of the district. Many teachers also told me personally that they were very upset by the decision. Others criticized the way in which the speech was aired. One white male teacher had a particularly negative reaction:

I think they really need to listen to the President when they put him on the TV....I thought...that was a travesty. I thought, that was un-American what we did. I mean honestly that they delayed it so they can watch it and then they cut him off. They started it too late and the bell rang. He wasn’t even done and what he was saying was basically stay in school....I think that was, that was terrible and they went along with...I mean it’s the president of the United States. If George Bush

wanted to go on TV, no matter what I think of him...I mean and I'm not a big fan of George Bush, but it's the president of the United States, he's not asking you to do something immoral.... I think they were going along with a lot of the tenor, but personally I think it was all the objections of him, being racially motivated.

Nonetheless, despite these objections, the administrators were unable or unwilling to do anything to stop the decision of the district. Even one of the upper-level district administrators, a white male who worked closely with the Superintendent, said openly that he thought the decision was a ridiculous one. It was unclear if he expressed this sentiment to the Superintendent or Board of Education. The day of the screening I was not aware of any particular students who left their classrooms to avoid seeing the President. However, I did hear that some teachers did not bother to turn the TV on at all. The following year, the district once again allowed students to opt out of viewing the speech.

Jefferson High School was attempting to address issues of race and class in ways that were ultimately contradictory and unsuccessful. While high school administrators discussed the need for more inclusive practices, they had very limited knowledge, a lack of vision, and a lack of support from higher up. Their line that “diversity is our strength” was supported with no action, except for that which seemed to directly contradict their goals. Much of the “anti-multiculturalism” at the school was the result of decisions made at the district level, as well as the general chaos of the high school. Administrators were so concerned with day-to-day discipline—focused largely on individual student behavior, enforcing the dress code, and dealing with fights—that planning activities and events to celebrate diverse groups was simply not a priority. Nonetheless, by failing to prioritize such things as MLK Day and Black History Month, the school sent a clear message that it was not concerned with, interested in, or committed to ensuring that the voices and experiences of black students or staff in the school were heard, appreciated, or celebrated.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

Although the administrators at Jefferson High School were interested in issues of diversity and multiculturalism, they lacked the skill, knowledge, and courage to address racial tensions in their school. While they had enough awareness of the problems they faced to welcome me into their school, and into their meetings, ultimately, when crises

arose, they were unable to think beyond “triage.” As the principal said when talking about the day-to-day of his job, “This is not emergency care or preemptive care; this is triage care. We’re just trying to manage them as they come in.” Their reluctance was reinforced by broader racial tensions in the area. It was rumored that administrators were facing rather serious racial intimidation from some community members. At least one had received a threatening email about being one of the few white people left in the district.

Not unlike many school leaders, Jefferson administrators simply did not have the tools to critically engage in practices that would address the deep-seated race and class tensions between students or adults in the building. Like most schools in the country, they were being asked to do more with less, and were expected to be experts in areas where they had never received training. Administrators themselves had very limited experience discussing race and class, and were clearly not comfortable doing so.

In large part, the administrators were unable to acknowledge race because the district had cultivated a culture of willful ignorance, which silenced these issues from the top down, located the power in the hands of a few actors uninterested in issues of difference, engaged in hiring procedures that limited the mobility of staff of color, and suppressed data that could have been useful in improving effectiveness. The inability of school-level administrators to challenge this system is not surprising in light of Wolcott’s (1973) findings that “the candidate who aspires to the principalship has already tacitly demonstrated that he recognizes and accepts the authority system of the school. The process of socialization into teaching tends to assure that candidates who survive can live with the educational hierarchy” (p. 196). In other words, the cycle of racial reproduction started with administrators who accepted the status quo, perhaps unconsciously, as a prerequisite for their job.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **Making Light of Race: Hyper-racialized Interactions, Verbal Bullying and the Realities of Racism**

The rule of colorblindness disguises (sometimes deliberately) or normalizes (sometimes unwittingly) relationships of privilege and subordination. It gives those who have enjoyed little power in our society no mechanisms for understanding and challenging the systemic nature of their oppression. It affirms the existing imbalance in power relations; all that must change is for the privileged within the society to learn to tolerate on an individual basis those who were previously raced black or brown. . . . This approach does not involve any fundamental rethinking of how race has socially and politically constructed privilege.  
-Guinier and Torres, *The Miner's Canary*, p. 42

#### **I. INTRODUCTION**

There were two narratives circulating among students at Jefferson High School about the ways in which race and class were navigated on the ground. The first, and most prominent, told of a rapidly diversifying school in which students were successfully building relationships across difference. In this rendition, students claimed “everyone got along,” and viewed their school as a model of a new “post-racial” America. However, these claims were substantiated by hyper-racialized interactions. Jefferson students regularly made racial jokes and used racial slurs in “carefree” and “light-hearted” ways that they insisted reflected a new political climate in which racism was a sin of the past that they invoked as the humor of the present.

Bubbling just beneath the surface was another story. This story was one in which students were segregated and racial humor was a smokescreen for the perpetuation of racial bias, discrimination, and segregation. Black students colluded in their own oppression by laughing along and targeting themselves because they believed that moving beyond racism was synonymous with choosing to overlook it; white students felt justified in blaming people of color for their own discomfort; and students from all racial backgrounds who viewed these interactions as problematic felt silenced. This silence allowed verbal bullying and derogatory racial humor about black, Arab, and Mexican people to be the dominant and most accepted form of cross-racial communication. In

turn, the notion of “everyone getting along” was rooted in the idea of what Anderson (1983) calls the “imagined community”—one in which “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation” the school was “conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (p. 7). As will be seen in this chapter, the notion of Jefferson as a harmonious multiracial community was, in fact, a figment of students’ imaginations—one that required that students of color deny the ways in which they were racially targeted and that white students deny their deeply held racial biases. As a result, cross-racial friendships were not deep, authentic, or honest. While students were “cool” across race, they were no more. As Tatum (2007) asks, quoting David Mura, “What kind of friendship is that?”

## **II. EVERYBODY GETS ALONG?: SEGREGATED SPACES**

### **A. A Segregated Community**

Jefferson High School and the larger Jefferson community were spaces segregated by race and class. While many of the new subdivisions were racially integrated, in the trailer parks and apartments where lower-income students resided racial divisions were apparent. According to students, there were very few black families living in trailer parks. Similarly, there were few reports of white students living in apartments. Even within the subdivisions, where black and white students lived next door to each other, it was not common for students from different racial backgrounds to hang out in any significant way. Within the school extracurricular activities and, to some degree, advanced and remedial classes were also segregated in expected ways, as were friend groups. Jasmine, a black student, said that when it came to social networks, “black people hang out together, white people hang out together, mixed people hang out together, and so on and so forth.” Other students, like Logan, who was white, admitted, “I honestly can say I’ve never hung out with a black person outside of school.”

Despite this segregation, students often talked about the school as a place where, “everyone got along.” As Matt, a white student described, “There’s a lot of accepting people here. Like it doesn’t matter if you’re black or white. It doesn’t matter really. As long as like you’re not a prick, then people are okay with it.” Riley, a white female student agreed, “Everyone gets along so well. I don’t think that people have enough time

to be racist.” The notion of racism being “time-dependent” was indicative of students’ lack of racial consciousness. Most had never thought about race in any critical way prior to their conversations with me. In turn they had trouble conceptualizing the mechanisms through which racism was reproduced. Nonetheless, in some regards Riley’s assessment was true. In classrooms, black and white students sat next to each other, talked, laughed, and worked together in groups. In hallways, students from different racial backgrounds could be seen socializing and joking with each other. Some students also dated interracially. However, while students were “cool” across racial lines, few had close friends from different racial backgrounds. Pamela, a multiracial senior, explained:

I think people just gravitate toward their own race. It’s kind of funny, and it reminds me of [the movie] *Freedom Writers*...It’s like in the classroom everyone’s cool with one another and usually in the hallway, but when it comes to like sitting down and talking, you know, and who you’re gonna be seen with, people identify with their race.

Although students “got along” on the surface, underlying racial tensions permeated the school culture. Salim, one of the few Arab and Muslim students, summarized the situation. “Everybody gets along...that’s true,” he said, but there’s also “an awkwardness” when it comes to the mixing of groups.

### **B. Not Just a Table: Why Do All the Black (and White) Kids Sit Together in the Cafeteria?**

The cultural divide between black and white students was most apparent during lunchtime. Due to the construction of an addition to the building, there were two cafeterias at Jefferson. Students from all grade levels, socio-economic positions, racial groups, and genders reported that the older of the two was the “white cafeteria” and the newer one was the “black cafeteria.” Students described the segregation of cafeterias rather bluntly. As Pamela said, “They’re segregated. Like point blank they’re segregated.” While the descriptors “black” and “white” were not exactly accurate in terms of who ate in each cafeteria, they did reflect students’ understandings of who belonged in these spaces. In particular, the white cafeteria was almost exclusively white. While there were a few black students, they were very clearly “tokens”—the only black student in an otherwise all white friend group. In contrast, the black cafeteria was fairly

mixed—perhaps due to the much larger size of the room. However, individual lunch tables were similarly segregated with almost all black or white students sitting together.

A number of black students who had transferred into the district more recently talked about the process of “discovering” the black cafeteria. For example, Victoria said:

My first year coming here, my sophomore year, I didn't know there was two cafeterias. And I went to one and I'm like, “Wow, am I the only black kid in this school?” I think it might have been like me and one other black person in there. And then after a while I found out there was another one on the other side of the school and I was like, “Oh, this is where all the black people are.”

Bianca said her black friends directed her toward the right cafeteria. “When I first got here...my schedule said you eat on the old side because that's where your class is.” However, the black students she had met, “were like, nah come down here, eat at the new end...[T]hey were like, ‘You know the white people eat at [that] side.’” While not all of the students at Jefferson were given this kind of explicit direction, most eventually figured out the social rules. Brandy, a black female student explained: “Freshman year a lot of people I guess are confused; they don't catch on. It's like there's a lot of freshmen right now, freshman white kids they still eat...[in the black cafeteria], but I guarantee you, next year they will probably be...[in the white one].” When asked why this happens, she said, “I don't know, I think it goes all the way back to early Jefferson years.” The segregation of cafeterias went back so far in Jefferson history that no students were able to recall a time in which the cafeterias had not been segregated. It is likely that lunchroom segregation and the construction of the additional cafeteria to accommodate the (racially) expanding district happened simultaneously. As a result, one of the first racial lessons learned by students was which cafeteria they belonged in. While technically free to choose where to eat lunch, social pressures ensured that students stayed where they belonged in the racial order.

### **1. We Just Want to Sit with Our Friends**

Despite the very overt ways in which the cafeterias were racialized, many students argued that the segregation was not about “race.” According to Ed, a white student, “I sit with my friends. Like...usually people sit with their friends...it don't depend on the color.” Other students like Molly acknowledged that friend groups often

fell along lines of race but still said “I don’t think it’s segregation. We just happen to sit with our friends and the majority of some people’s friends are one ethnicity.” Gina agreed, “The white kids are all friends with each other and the black kids are all friends with each other....I don’t think it’s a problem....who you’re comfortable with is who you hang out with.” These students claimed it was coincidental and “natural” that their friends tended to come from the same racial background—so natural in fact that they did not think the word “segregation,” which implied something both *intentional* and *negative*, was appropriate to capture what was happening.

However, some students thought the separation of friend groups was rooted in deeper hostility and mistrust across race, albeit unconscious. For example, Matt said, “You know that there is really big segregation. Like you see basically rows of black people and then tables of white people. Like it is definitely segregated....Maybe subconsciously...we want to sit with like our own color.” For him, the segregation of cafeterias was about more than sitting with friends, it was also about feeling most comfortable with people from your own racial background. Robyn, a student who was newer to the school, believed the segregation of cafeterias was a reflection of larger racial discord:

I think there’s a social or a racial boundary between African Americans and whites here. Like a lot of students that go here don’t really notice it. I’m like you have to see it ‘cause when you go into the lunchroom, have you ever gone in there? Just go into the lunchroom and you’ll notice. You’ll have the African American students stick to one section and then you have the whites that stick to their section. Because you have the group thing. Like you’re more friends with like your own race type deal. I’ve noticed that a lot here.

As Robyn suggested, friend groups were not mere coincidence, nor were they formed based solely on who you had the most in common with. Rather unspoken rules and differential racialized experiences in society, and in the school, facilitated segregation. As Menna explained, “There’s certain people that you don’t hang out with in terms of color.” This understanding that certain racial lines were not to be crossed challenged students’ claims that the segregation of cafeterias was meaningless. Rather, Jefferson, like most institutions in the United States, was a place where young people struggled to build meaningful connections across racial lines.

## 2. Should All the Black (and White) Kids Sit Together in the Cafeteria?

Students had mixed feelings about the segregation of cafeterias. Some realized that race mediated their friendships, and struggled with how to reconcile this with their belief that they should be “colorblind” and “post-racial.” Brandy had particularly strong feelings about the segregation of the cafeterias. Although she admitted eating in the black cafeteria, she also said, “It’s unfortunate. Because you don’t learn anything new by sticking with the same crowd of people. Like if you went out of your way to talk to somebody else or meet somebody else you could learn a lot.” Not only was she concerned about the limited opportunity for growth, she also thought “it looks bad if a parent comes and he’s taking a tour and it’s noticeable that all the black kids are down there and all the white kids are...it just doesn’t look good. If I would have been elected president, I would have tried my best to make it to where the cafeterias weren’t so separated. I don’t like my school looking...racist like that.” Brandy worried about the larger racial implications of this phenomenon. She did not believe this trend to be insignificant, rather she felt it was an illustration of the racial divisiveness prevalent in the school and the community that at once embarrassed and stumped her.

It was true that the segregation was a reflection of deeper racial tensions and biases among students. For example, Seth, a white student said, “I’ve heard some of their comments which is really ignorant, which I won’t repeat, but just...if a person of a different race would go sit near them then they move to a different table.” Nonetheless, it should be noted that cafeteria segregation is not inherently problematic, nor is it unique in any way. In *Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race*, Beverly Daniel Tatum (2003) says that all integrated schools deal with racially segregated cafeterias, in large part because young people are in the process of figuring out who they are and where they belong—especially students of color who are also learning to negotiate their racial and ethnic identities. Moreover, because of the racialized nature of our society, individuals are often more comfortable with people who “look like them.” Building an *intra*-racial community and relationships within your racial group is an important part of social and personal development. Arguably, this need is even more significant in racially integrated settings in which people of color are the minority group. In other words, the cafeteria may have been one of the few spaces in

which students felt they could be themselves without having to negotiate what it meant to interact with the racial other.

### **3. An Attempt to Intervene**

Although the racial segregation in cafeterias was not necessarily problematic—especially when compared to the many other racial issues the school faced—it was the only instance in which the school attempted to intervene in race relations at a structural level. The year before the research for this study began the administration decided to implement a policy requiring that students eat in the cafeteria closest to their 4<sup>th</sup> hour classes, indicated by a color-coded sticker on their ID cards. According to Ryan, a white student, the administrators made this decision because they “didn’t want it to turn into like back when Martin Luther King was alive.” However, like most students, he thought, “that was the most stupid thing I’ve ever heard in my life! That they would think that it would get so far, like that we would...put signs like only white people, like it’s not like that!” Such incredulity revealed students’ inability to link their own discourse and interactions to a continuing story of racial discrimination within the United States. As will be seen in the subsequent sections, students at Jefferson were so out of touch with racial history they were at constant risk of repeating it.

Other students were resentful that the policy limited their ability to hang out with their friends. As Winnie put it, “It was frustrating as heck cause like all my best friends were assigned to one lunchroom and I was assigned to another and I’m like, okay look, this is the only free period I have and it’s like twenty minutes cause it takes me God knows how long to get my food. The food’s bad as it is, just let me sit with my friends.” Within weeks students figured out ways to get around the rule. “That worked for like the first two or three weeks of school,” Winnie explained, “then eventually people just scratched off the...[stickers] on their cards and went to the cafeterias they wanted to.” Multiple students reported scratching off the color code, printing a new one, or simply not bringing their ID card to school. In other words, students used great ingenuity and put forth significant effort to maintain the racial segregation of cafeterias and eat with their friends. By the time this study began, the cafeterias were once again segregated.

The fact that this indicator of the continuing significance of race was the only area of intervention undertaken by the administration indicates that Jefferson was capable of thinking of race only when it was made explicit in ways that might, as Brandy put it, make them look “racist.” Given the findings of Tatum (2007; 2003) and others (Helms, 1990; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998) about the importance of racial identity development for young people, the segregation of the cafeterias should have, arguably, been the least of administrators concerns. Instead, they should have been more worried about how segregation reinforced notions of white superiority in the school more broadly.

### **III. MAKING LIGHT OF RACE: VERBAL BULLYING**

These are different white people. These are very brave white people. Very brave white people.  
-Bianca, 11<sup>th</sup> grade, African American

Against the backdrop of racially segregated cafeterias, friend groups, and extra-curricular activities, students at Jefferson talked about race frequently. As Harrison, a white male student, explained talking about race “happens every day, like breathing.” This was especially true in instances in which students were interacting across race. The racial diversity of the school—which included significant numbers of white and black students, as well as small percentages of students from Asian, Latino and Arab backgrounds—created an environment in which students wanted to “have fun” with race, as Salim put it. During these conversations race was raised in ways students primarily considered joking. It was this idea of “race as fun” that constituted the dominant narrative of difference at the school. According to Winnie, a mixed race student, at Jefferson “racism is a joke. It’s like a huge joke,” primarily because the area had a reputation for being what she called a “hick place.” Because Jefferson was the kind of rural, white community stereotypically depicted as a bastion of racism, students felt they had more leeway to invoke racial humor. It was through this humorous banter that they were able to connect with those outside of their own racial group. However, these interactions were not as light as many students wanted to believe. Instead, they served to reinforce racial stereotypes, racial biases, and racial hierarchies.

## A. Racial Jokes

The first way students engaged in hyper-racialized interactions was through the telling of racial jokes<sup>35</sup> in integrated settings across race. Students consistently reported that jokes about race were regular and prevalent across grade-level and social group.<sup>36</sup> The following sections outline when, how, and at whom racial jokes were made, and illuminate the ways in which humor was a smokescreen for the perpetuation, and reinforcement of racial bias.

### 1. Black Jokes

*Shayla:* What about the racial jokes?

*Matt:* Racial jokes, um okay, how do you stop five black men from raping a white woman?

*Shayla:* I don't know how?

*Matt:* Throw them a basketball.

*Shayla:* Alright. Throw them a basketball. So that's the kind of jokes that you would tell black guys or that you tell to each other?

*Matt:* I...have some black friends that are comfortable with that, and like I guess it's those people that kind of bond everybody together in a way.

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<sup>35</sup> I use the term "racial jokes" as opposed to "racist jokes" to encompass the many kinds of jokes happening in the school that invoke race. Depending on who was speaking, how jokes were interpreted, and what they were about, these comments were at times "*a joke with racial content*" and at others "*a racist joke*" (Davidson, 1987). While the line between these two kinds of jokes is thin (and arguably unclear) it seems important to note that not all the jokes were *explicitly* derogatory even if they were based on stereotypical assumptions.

<sup>36</sup> Other ethnographers have documented the presence of racial jokes among students in integrated school settings (Foley, 1990, Pollock, 2004). However, these works have not pursued inquires about racial jokes at any great length, nor have they sufficiently reflected on the ways in which racial jokes reproduce unjust relationships between students across race. Billig (2001) notes the limited scholarly work on the connection between racism and humor. He argues that the hesitance to take seriously the study of humor in the investigation of racial bias stems from the fact that, "When considering the topic of humor, there is a temptation to take a celebratory stance, praising the human capacity for laughter and joking. This can lead to researchers specifically downgrading the possible links between humour and prejudice, as if what is to be celebrated should be kept distinct from that which is to be criticized" (p. 269). Nonetheless, a number of scholars in the fields of cultural studies and psychology have critically explored racial humor and the connection to prejudice and discrimination (Billig, 2001, Davidson, 1987, Dolf Zillmann & S Holly Stocking, 1976, Lockyer & Pickering, 2005, Rappoport, 2005, Weaver, 2011). However, they have not done so in the context of K-12 schools.

*Shayla:* Oh. Say more about that.

*Matt:* It's um, there's this um...my friend Devon [black]. He dresses like I guess you would say like as a white person who likes Scene or listens to like Death Metal and stuff. At that same time, he talks like, I don't want to...like he talks like a black person I guess. He talks that way, but he's totally comfortable with both sides and like, you know...

*Shayla:* So is that a joke that people tell him or that he would tell?

*Matt:* [Both]. Like he would tell it himself. Like even among black, um, minorities like they themselves sometimes will make like jokes about their own race. But it's really accepting here.

This exchange between Matt, a middle-class white male student being raised by a single father, and myself, captured the ways in which students at Jefferson used humor to mediate cross-racial interactions. As the case of Matt suggests, racial humor at Jefferson primarily took the form of what students called “black jokes,” predominantly perpetrated by white students. “Black jokes” took a number of forms, ranging from what Salim referred to as, “just the super-stereotypical black jokes like they like chicken and watermelon and all that good stuff,” to depictions of black people as sexually deviant,<sup>37</sup> violent, dangerous, and academically, economically and socially inferior (Weaver, 2011).

Black jokes were mostly told in integrated settings, and as Madison, a white student, explained, “Mainly white kids will say racist jokes.” However, they did so in ways that they considered amusing, light-hearted, and illustrative of interracial camaraderie. Bianca, a black student, explained how racial jokes happened: “Let me give you an example from my fifth hour. It was this [white] guy in my fifth hour and every day he comes up and he says, ‘You want to hear a black joke?’ I’m like, ‘No, not really.’ He’s like, ‘You sure?’ I was like, ‘Okay, tell me the black joke.’” In this interaction, the white student was eager to tell his black female peer a joke he thought they would both consider funny. He openly admitted that the “humor” of the joke was going to target her racial identity but did not seem to think that this made it problematic in any way. Bianca

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<sup>37</sup> As Patricia Hill Collins (2004) has noted, assertions of black men as dangerous to white women were historically used to demonization, oppression, and justifications against them by white men.

was hesitant to hear the joke. Clearly annoyed, she initially told him that she was not interested. However, he persisted and she ultimately gave in.

This kind of tenuous exchange was common among students across race. White students publically asserted their right to tell racial jokes, and black students acquiesced. In fact, they mostly laughed along, in large part because of the social pressure to be able to “take a joke.”<sup>38</sup> Whitney, a multiracial student, explained, “a white person can tell a joke about a black person and they’ll all be laughing.” Because black students laughed so easily, many students assumed no one was offended—that they sanctioned racial jokes, despite the fact that many students felt something the jokes were problematic. Nonetheless, their sense of something amiss rarely surfaced in any significant way.

In addition to formatting black students as stupid, ignorant, and sexually deviant, black jokes also framed “blackness” as inherently linked to poverty. For example, Brielle said, “There’s this one that people say about black people taking showers or taking baths using dish soap and that shows how poor you are or something.” Although black families in the district did not have a lower SES than white families, jokes about black poverty were still prevalent. Other jokes called on historical racism as fodder. For example, Jada, a black female student said, “I hear a lot of them and it’s like racial jokes that some white people might say are like, racist... One joke is like, your family tree or something about like being hung I guess.” Although Jada could not remember the details or punch line of this particular joke, it was clearly a reference to the practice of lynching of black men.<sup>39</sup>

While black students were primarily targets of these jokes, as Matt observed, they also colluded in these exchanges by telling black jokes about themselves. Black students were particularly likely to make fun of peers who seemed to especially embody “blackness.” African students were called, “African booty-scratchers” and dark-skinned Black American students were called, “Black Gorillas.” Jasmine described one such scenario:

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<sup>38</sup> A number of scholar who study humor find that in the United States there is a cultural expectation to “have a sense of humor.” Being able to laugh at oneself is thought to be evidence of this trait (Billig, 2001, Burma, 1946, Davidson, 1987, Dolf Zillmann & S Holly Stocking, 1976, Lockyer & Pickering, 2005, Rappoport, 2005, Weaver, 2011).

<sup>39</sup> For more information on lynching see: (Apel, 2004, Beck & Tolnay, 1990, Perloff, 2000, Rice, 2003). In particular, Billig’s (2001) work explores lynching as a joke. He writes that jokes like these allow racists to “enjoy the fun of the lynch mob without moving from their computer” (p. 287).

There's this one kid he's really, really dark. Somebody had on, I guess they were supposed to be white shoes, but they were black, they just looked like a whole bunch of oil had spilled on them...and my friend she was like, "Why, do those shoe look like Devon?" And I was like, "Dang!"

Like their white peers, black youth were also a part of a larger system that maintained dominant power structures through cultural hegemony (Gramsci, Hoare, & Nowell-Smith, 1971). Hegemony produces a system in which the seemingly neutral, everyday practices of individuals uphold differential class-factions, and, in this case, race-factions. It involves, "the construction of a whole lived reality such that the existing political, economic, and social structures [are] taken for granted by the mass of the people" (Gunn, 2006, p. 707). In this instance, the hegemonic practice of targeting black students through "disparagement humor" (Ferguson & Ford, 2004) was not only maintained by those students from racially privileged groups, but also by those subordinate groups who were being targeted. Cultural hegemony at Jefferson involved the construction of a reality in which white racial dominance through joking was accepted and normalized.

Black jokes were so common at Jefferson that despite some of the caution they displayed regarding "where" and around whom they could tell these jokes, virtually none of the students found racial jokes to be particularly remarkable. In the following exchange, I was talking to Danny, a white student, about the prevalence of racial jokes at the school. Danny had been in the district his entire life and came from a very wealthy family. His parents were divorced but both had remarried. Two years prior to this study his mother's husband died suddenly, leaving her a widow at 45. His stepfather's pension and social security, along with his mother's inherited wealth, was enough for them to live very comfortably without his mother having to work. Danny's father, a general contractor, owned a construction business that had built some of the fancy bars and lounges in the nearby college town. In addition, he had built a sizeable two-story home on a large plot of land in the country where I visited to interview him.

This exchange took place early in my research when I was just learning about the dynamics of race and class at Jefferson. I was still fairly surprised by the frequency and nature of the racial jokes I had heard. I asked Danny where the jokes came from:

*Danny:*[People] either just make them up or they're all over the internet. They're

everywhere.<sup>40</sup>

*Shayla:* So people go home googling [racial jokes] and take them to school the next day?

*Danny:* Yeah you can look them up, but they're pretty well known. Everyone pretty much knows black jokes.

*Shayla:* I don't know them!

*Danny:* You don't? You don't know any black jokes? You're lying!

*Shayla:* I'm telling you seriously. I have on occasion heard racial jokes, but I haven't heard anything like this until I got to this school. I've never seen anything like this.

*Danny:* That's weird. I don't know what to say about that. I've always pictured it as normal. Just across the board as something that like everyone does.

Danny was not alone. Rather, my interviews and observations revealed that students at Jefferson were so accustomed to racial jokes they thought they were the normative mode of cross-racial communication, not only at their high school, but in society more broadly.<sup>41</sup>

## **2. There are no White Jokes**

Because students were a part of a larger hegemonic system it was not altogether surprising that black youth were telling disparaging jokes about black people. However, what was interesting was that for the most part, there were no white jokes. In other words, not only were white students not telling racial jokes about their own groups, when black students decided to participate in cross-racial joking they did so by denigrating their own group for the amusement of their white peers, rather than taking the opportunity to insult them.

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<sup>40</sup> Billig (2001) and Weaver (2011) both study the prevalence of racist jokes on the internet. In particular, Billig finds that many of the websites where racist jokes are found sympathize with or are created by the Ku Klux Klan.

<sup>41</sup> In his study of racial humor among college students, Davidson (1987) similarly found that racial jokes on the college campus "racial joking was widespread" and that "whites were more involved in racial joking" than students of color who were "more likely to be the butt of the cultural stock of racial jokes" (p. 298).

The culture of disparaging “black jokes” was so normative and so deeply ingrained that most students were completely unaware of the dearth of white jokes until asked about it directly. For example, when I asked Logan, a white male student, about examples of “white jokes” at the school he said, “As bad as it sounds, I’ve never heard a white joke. I don’t know how you can make one, besides calling a white person like, a honky.” Lauren, a black female student agreed, “I haven’t heard black people making fun of white people,” as did Salim, “White jokes? I don’t know. I don’t got any white jokes.” Student after student said they had not heard, could not think of, and did not make white jokes. Danny, explained this phenomenon:

There’s no white jokes. There’s tons and tons of black jokes and then there’s one or two white jokes and they’re not funny at all. I don’t know. It’s weird. There’s just absolutely no white jokes. You can do white jokes, there’s just no ones that are funny. There’s one like, what do you call a thousand white people falling down a hill or something? An avalanche. ‘Cause they’re white and it’s snow and they’re falling down a hill. Like, that’s hilarious.

Danny’s sarcasm was not lost. According to him, even when the occasional white joke was told, it was not offensive or discriminatory in the ways that jokes targeting people of color were. White jokes did not attack the character, honesty, culture, or morality of white folks—rather they commented literally on their skin color.

During the two years of this study, the avalanche joke told by Danny was one of two “white jokes” I heard. The other focused on white men’s lack of physical prowess and athletic ability. Raymond, a black student, recited it: “‘What do you call five white people sitting on a bench?’ And they’ll be like, ‘What?’ And we’ll say, ‘The NBA.’ Get it? Five people sitting on the bench? They don’t play in the NBA.” This joke, ultimately reinscribed notions of black men as successful only insofar as they were thought to be physically superior to white men. However, beyond this example, white people only appeared in racial jokes to illuminate the inferiority of black people. As Tatum (2007) writes, “...what it means to be White is a story of achievement, success, and of being in charge” (p. 33). Students’ jokes reflected their implicit beliefs in this assumption. Jada, a black female student, gave an example. She said, that black students at the school would say to white students things like, “Well, you white, go be a lawyer. Just something stupid like, go be a lawyer at NYU.” White students would retort, “You black go rob a liquor

store or something like that. And they go back and forth like that.” In turn, while white people were repeatedly talked about as lawyers and wealthy college graduates, the only positive jokes about black men were those in which they were playing basketball—or using basketball to distract themselves from raping white women.

The fact that there were no white jokes was particularly interesting given the class positions of racialized groups. Because so many of the white students were poor and lived in trailer parks, it seemed that black students could have easily used their higher economic positions to demean their white peers. However, they did not. This suggests that class status was not a significant mediator of cross-racial interactions. Regardless of the lower class positions of many of the white students, by nature of their whiteness they were presumed to be a part of a larger system in which whiteness and success went hand-in-hand. Even though the large majority of white students did not have parents who graduated from NYU or who were lawyers (Appendix, Table 9.5 and 9.6), by nature of their whiteness they were still socially positioned in superior locations when talked about abstractly in comparison to their black counterparts.

In turn, despite students’ claims that these interactions were “no big deal” and “just jokes,” they ultimately reinscribed racial stereotypes, and contributed to a larger discourse of black youth “dysfunctional” and as “social problems” (Kelley, 1997). When asked to explain the paucity of white racial jokes, students reported that white jokes were infrequent because they did not perceive white people to do things that were joke-worthy. Jefferson students believed that only people of color engaged in actions and behaviors that could be “made fun of.” In contrast, white people were the social standard.

The following exchange with Nathan, a student who had a white mother and an Asian father, but presented primarily as Asian, expresses this sentiment:

*Nathan:* I feel like because there’s a majority of black people [at JHS] and since there’s no other racial groups they just talk about black people.

*Shayla:* Are there white jokes?

*Nathan:* Not really.

*Shayla:* Why not?

*Nathan:* I feel like this is how jokes start. If a racial group does something and someone else looks at it, they'll make a joke out of it. A majority of people look at white people like, "Oh, they don't do anything [bad]." So if they don't do anything [bad] they can't make a joke out of it. And black people seem to do more crime and do things so [we're] like, "Oh, they're bad." We make jokes about it, that's why there's more. They do more bad things....The majority of black jokes that I know, they take something that black people do that no other race does and they make their joke.

This excerpt reveals a number of things about the racial ideologies of students at Jefferson. Nathan's comment that black people were the targets of most racial jokes because "there's no other racial groups," indicates that he believed "white" to be a racially neutral identity. White privilege allows for white people to see themselves, and be seen by others, as raceless individuals, rather than racialized group members. In other words, "as long as race is something only applied to non-white people, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people" (Rothenberg, 2008, p. 10). It was from this position of racial privilege—in which "white" went un-named and un-seen—that one-sided racial jokes emerged. Only the black students "had" race, so only they could be made fun of racially.

Nathan's comments also revealed that the foundation of the racial jokes was ultimately a belief in black inferiority. He believed black people simply "did more bad things," and said that he "...mostly just laugh[s] [at racial jokes] and I don't even think about what they say....probably cause I think maybe some are true." Black students also believed it was the "truth" of racial jokes that accounted for both their humor and their social acceptability. Kwesi, a black male student whose parents had moved to the U.S. from Africa decades before he was born, explained a joke recited to him by his white friend: "He was like, 'What do you call a white man in a suit? Successful. But what do you call a Black man in a suit? At trial.' It's funny because it's 75% true." Because Kwesi believed the joke was an accurate reflection of the different social positions black and white men inhabited in the United States, he did not find it problematic. In fact, Kwesi argued that the white perpetrator was, "not trying to be racial," evidenced by the fact that "he has some really racial jokes that he didn't even want to say cause that's racist."

Scholars have found that despite students' efforts to distinguish between "racist jokes" and jokes that were simply commenting on the reality of racial stratification "...humor can act as a form of racist rhetoric for serious racism and thus should not always be seen as 'just a joke' or as fundamentally harmless" (Weave, 2011 p. 431). Similarly, Burma (1946) noted that "Any persons or groups who are the butt of jokes thereby suffer discriminatory treatment and are indirectly being relegated to inferior status" (p. 714-715). In other words, the very nature of the jokes being told created a culture that reinforced and reproduced notions of black inferiority. Students from all racial backgrounds at Jefferson accepted that black people were poor, dangerous, irresponsible, violent, stupid and ignorant (see Chapter 5). As Fallon, a black female student put it, "We're loud, we were slaves back then, so they have a lot of jokes on us." In contrast, the racial history of the United States is one in which white people have historically held power—power that students could not figure out how to effectively mock. In turn, it was not simply hard to make racial jokes about white people because they did not do things that were joke-worthy (I found that white students at Jefferson did many "joke worthy" things). Rather the silence of black (and white) students was also rooted in the taboo of disparaging whiteness.

In the context of the United States in which white is supreme, making white jokes had a different sociopolitical significance than making black jokes. When white students targeted black students the worst that would happen is that feelings would be hurt. However, in the context of US race relations, making "white jokes" may have been perceived as a greater risk. You simply did not "play" with white people in this way perhaps because, as one of Gwaltney's respondents noted in the ethnography *Drylongso*, "The biggest difference between [black folks] and white folks is that we know when we are playing" (Kelley, 1997, p. 15). It was not guaranteed that white students would be able to distinguish disparaging comments directed at them as "jokes."

Hebdige's (1979) analysis of how ideology works moves in the direction of providing an explanation for why racial jokes were one-sided. He writes:

...when we come to look...at the way in which specific ideologies work, how some gain dominance and others remain marginal, we can see that...the ideological field is by no means neutral....We can see that "maps of meaning" are charged with a potentially explosive significance because they are traced and re-

traced along lines laid down by the dominant discourse about reality, the dominant ideologies. They thus tend to represent, in however obscure and contradictory a fashion, the interests of dominant groups in society.

White students were the dominant group, and the dominant ideology, that of black inferiority, served to protect their interests and reinforce their dominant status. In turn, white students' feelings that these jokes were "no big deal," stemmed from a position of racial privilege in which they had never had to face the discrimination they were inflicting.

### **3. "Tick Tick Boom"**

While "black jokes" perpetrated by white students were the most common form of racial jokes at Jefferson, other ethnic minorities were also targeted. In particular, the few Arab students were regularly called terrorists. Salim, a 12<sup>th</sup> grader, and Khalif, a 10<sup>th</sup> grader, were the eldest two children in a middle-class family of six kids. Their mother was raised in Brooklyn and their father had emigrated from Palestine. They had lived in a number of states because their father worked in a managerial position for a company that transferred him frequently. They were one of the few Muslim families in Jefferson and had been living in one of the subdivisions since Salim was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Raymond, a black male student who was friends with Salim described their racial banter in the following way:

Like I have this friend, Salim. He's a Palestinian. Me and him, we go back and forth, back and forth with racial jokes and it's funny. It's just funny cause we know that these are stereotypes that are true, some of them. And some of them are just off the wall. Like he'll tell me, "Hey man why don't you go steal something?" And I'll tell Salim, "Man why don't you go blow something up." And we'll... laugh about it 'cause we know like, that's not us. That's those other people that chose to do that and those are bad decisions that our races made and we're just making fun of each other for it. It's not that big of a deal...

While Raymond and Salim considered themselves friends, they used some of the most derogatory racial stereotypes about their racial groups as points of humor. According to Raymond, these jokes were funny because, while they were true about many people in their racial groups, they were not true about the two of them. He saw himself and Salim as exceptional cases that challenged stereotypes.

While Raymond described himself and Salim as equal opportunity offenders, Salim undeniably bore some of the most egregious racial commentary at Jefferson. According to Pamela, a mixed female student who was also friends with Salim, “His nickname that someone came up with like a year ago is Tick-Tick because he’s Middle Eastern and it’s like a bomb. That’s his nickname, so it’ll go to that point.” In addition to hearing students call Salim and Khalif “Tick Tick, Boom,” I also observed a class in which someone wrote Salim’s name on the board and drew a picture of a bomb next to it. The picture stayed up all class. The teacher did not notice or intervene.

Most students, including Salim himself, laughed off the interactions as being in good fun. Salim often played along with his peers, making jokes about other students in return. He described their interactions:

We play around with [race] though. Like they make a Arabic joke. I make a black joke, or a white joke, or a Chinese joke or something like that. You know, it’s all fun....It’s usually the people that make the jokes, you know, I’m friends with them, or I’ve hung out with them before or after school or something like that.

When asked about the incident in which a bomb was drawn next to his name on the chalkboard, he quickly laughed it off as well:

*Salim:* It was a joke. I didn’t really care. It was all in good fun I guess.

*Shayla:* And what was the reference he was making?

*Salim:* Um, Arabs are terrorists, I guess. That’s usually what the jokes are around.

*Shayla:* And that doesn’t make you feel bad or anything?

*Salim:* No.

*Shayla:* Do you make jokes like that too, about Arabs being terrorists?

*Salim:* Sometimes. You know, I’ll add onto it, but it’s all in good fun at the end.

*Shayla:* I also hear you had a nickname that they came up with last year.

*Salim:* Yeah, Tick-Tick. That was one of them. Would you like me to explain? I don’t know, it was all in good fun.

*Shayla:* So how did it happen?

*Salim:* I have no idea. It just happened. . . . I don't know exactly who started it. It was just a nickname, but I don't really care.

Because racial jokes happened among “friends” and Salim lashed out at his peers in similar ways, he had convinced himself that their interactions were not problematic. However, as the only Arab student and the only Muslim student in his friend circle—and one of few in the school—he was at a decisive disadvantage when it came to such jokes. The power dynamics were not equal. Interestingly, while Salim was fairly dogmatic in his assertion that the racial jokes were not problematic, he did admit that sometimes they crossed the line. “Sometimes I do find myself taking it too far,” he said, “but you know, at the end we laugh about it.”

Although Salim said he did not feel offended by the jokes, other students thought he might be. Pamela, who had originally said that he was the perpetrator of many racial jokes, added that she also thought they bothered him. She said, “I don't think he shows it. I think he might be offended. . . . I don't know.” Nonetheless, Pamela continued to make fun of him in this way. Jasmine, a black female student, was particularly empathetic. She said she often heard him complaining about the fact that so many students would refer to him as “my Arabic friend, Salim.” She said:

He be like, stop calling me that. It's so funny 'cause I can like, picture his face. He's always just the Arabic guy. He seems okay with it, but I don't think he's okay. I mean if I was just like one of the few little speckles of black children in a really, really big group of kids I wouldn't be too happy about it. I think I would feel awkward.

In Chapter 7, we will see that Salim's brother, Khalif, a student who participated in the intergroup dialogue intervention, had a much more critical analysis of these hyper-racialized interactions. His experience challenged Salim's claims that what was happening was “good fun.”

In many ways, the story of Salim was representative of the ways in which racial jokes reduced marginalized students to their racial identities. Similarly, black students—who targeted Salim, and were themselves targeted by their white peers—struggled to escape notions of their racial inferiority. In both cases, students of color formatted themselves in ways that obscured the racial privilege and oppression inherent in their joking interactions.

## B. Racial Slurs

The second way in which students engaged in hyper-racialized discourse was through the regular invocation of racial slurs. While racial jokes were fair game for students and almost never led to explicit racial conflict, as the fight opening this project indicated, racial slurs were much more regulated and, arguably, more likely to result in misunderstandings across race. Nonetheless, racial slurs were also used in “humorous” ways by students who asserted that they had successful intergroup relationships.

Raymond was a middle-class student who had lived in a subdivision in the district since early elementary school. He lived with his parents and his older sister, who was a college student at a university in the area. He described the ways in which racial slurs were exchanged at Jefferson and how he felt about these interactions:

I mean now, like white people and black people can play around with each other, like call each other names. Like a white kid can call somebody, a black kid, a nigger or something and then the black kid will just be like, alright man chill out. They won't like be all in their face, like, “What you call me? I'm ready to fight.” I think they really don't care anymore because like, I mean, if a white kid came up to me that I didn't know and called me like the N-word I'd be pretty upset and like nobody goes that far unless you know them, unless like you're pretty cool with them. I have white friends that are cool with me that'll like say it just like to see my reaction like see me laugh or whatever, and I just like shrug it off. It's not that big of a deal.

In middle school [it bothered me]. There's like these kids that used to just play around, like, “Shut up N-word.” I was like, “Man, shut up.” Then I called him the c-word cause I was like, “Why are you calling me this? Like we past racism a long time ago.” And I was like alright, you wanna play that game, I can play your game. And then like once...they felt offended that we started calling them the c-word as much as they called us the N-word, they said, “Alright man, let's just stop, this is going nowhere.” [But then] I grew up. I grew mature. I looked at it like, alright this person's not worth it if he's gonna call me this and be serious about it, he's not worth it. Why should somebody call me and the N-word, just like out of nowhere? I don't even know them. Why should I even care? Usually black kids don't initiate the slurs. It's usually the white kids and black kids they'll retaliate say the c-word. They'll have a big laugh about it [and say], “Let's go to lunch.”

It's surprising I know, I know. It's surprising 'cause I'll look at my parents and it's become socially acceptable. From like the perspective of like an adult right, I can imagine adults thinking that their goal was civil rights. Their goal with all this social justice stuff was not for the kids to start using those words against each other jokingly, but for actually not using them at all. [But]...it's okay because...I think we as students have grown up and we've realized that you know

what man, it's a word that the black race will always use forever and I can never see it like ever going away.

Raymond's narrative illuminates the ambivalence students felt about the exchange of racial slurs, and their often contradictory explanations of these interactions. In the same breath, Raymond admitted being offended when white peers called him the N-word, and approving of its usage by white students he was sufficiently "cool." According to Raymond, racial slurs had been reappropriated by black students, and passed on to white students, in ways that symbolized a new racial reality—one in which individuals presumed racial slurs to be mocking social commentary, rather than expressions of racist ideologies. Although he knew his parents would not understand, or approve of, these interactions, for him, the ability to let his white peers call him the N-word without becoming angry was evidence of individual maturity and social progress.

Explanations of this sort were common at Jefferson. Black and white students regularly used racial slurs across and within racial groups—particularly the N-word. Like racial jokes, racial slurs had become so common at the school that many were desensitized to them. As Harrison explained, at the school there were often:

White people saying stuff to black people, black people saying stuff to white people and a Latino will jump in. I don't think they hate each other. It's just the words are used so often we don't think much of it anymore. Like love and hate, really strong words. Once you say I love you to somebody, to everyone, every day, it loses its meaning. Same with like the N-word and cracker and whatever racial term is for a Mexican.

While Harrison was right about the prevalence of racial slurs, he was inaccurate regarding the frequency with which they were invoked and the meaning behind them. The N-word, like black jokes, was by far the most common slur. It served as the center of both joking interactions and racial hostilities in a way that other racial slurs did not. While students claimed that these interactions were also joking, as Billig (2001) notes referencing the work of Essed, "...racist slurs and name-calling remain a feature of black people's lives....It would be wrong, both morally and politically, to give the impression that such phenomena are 'just jokes' and, moreover, that these jokes have the positive value of contributing to the psychological wellbeing of the joker." To the contrary, the common usage of the N-word, and students' various reactions to it, indicated that it was

categorically different than slurs targeting white students. In instances in which white racial slurs were invoked to retaliate, it was clear that students were not fighting with equal weapons.

### **1. What's Up My Nigga?: Black Students' Usage of the N-Word**

Among black students, the N-word was a familiar greeting, used primarily between male students in the context of a greeting or casual conversation. As Dwayne, explained:

We use niggers as like, that's your boy. So we don't use it as in a bad term like how slaves used to use it, like calling them a nigger and all that stuff. We use it as this nigger is, like 'cause you know how all black people back in the day was niggers, but most black people's friends with each other and since you're a nigger and that's a nigger basically we just probably using it as a phrase like, "This is my nigger."

Most students at Jefferson found black students' usage of the N-word unremarkable. Joseph, a wealthier black student who lived in one of the subdivisions, said when he hears the N-word he "don't think nothing of it." Sarah, a white student also agreed that, "If you hear black people say it you don't really think anything. Like in the beginning when I started high school I was like [surprised], cause in middle school you don't really do that kind of stuff. But like in high school now I don't think anything of it." In turn, for most students at Jefferson, the usage of the N-word among black people was common, accepted, and expected.

While most black students felt comfortable using and hearing the N-word, others, like Kiara, felt the word was inappropriate:

I think due to all the black people here, like they say it to each other. I get really offended. I really just don't like that word. Like I feel that it should never be used. Because you know like it was a term used like replacing a black person's name. Like [white people] just called them that. And then here we are after...the Civil Rights Movement and everything, and they tried to stop it and then for us to bring it back, it's like it's kind of like slapping Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the face; you know, who cares what you fought for, we're going to bring it back anyway.

Kiara's feelings about the N-word highlight the complexity surrounding it. For her, it was a problematic appropriation of a historically oppressive word. This history did not allow

room for young people of her generation to use such language, even in racially homogenous groups.

Most black students located their understanding somewhere in-between that of Dwayne and Kiara. Jasmine admitted her own ambivalence about the word. “I mean it’s a word that shouldn’t be said too much at all ‘cause it’s like it’s a derogatory term. It’s used to make someone feel lower than you,” she said. However, she also disclosed that she regularly said it. When asked why, she responded, “People just got used to it. I just got used to it.” Many black students felt a similar ambivalence. As Brielle explained, “I mean like all the rappers and stuff say it and they’re black and stuff and I don’t know, it just seems like it’s like a cultural thing to me.” Nonetheless, they simultaneously felt it was a derogatory term that was risky to use in mixed company.

## **2. Regular Whites, Wiggers, and Racists: White Students’ Usage of the N-Word**

White students had significant exposure to the N-word, through both their access to media (Rose, 1994) and their relationships with black peers who used the word freely in their school. This exposure, combined with the hyper-racialized culture of the school, meant that at Jefferson the N-word was not the exclusive domain of black students. Instead, white students regularly used it as well—albeit with different levels of risk.

Three specific groups of white students used the N-word, “regular” white students whose closest friends were also white, but who perceived themselves to be “cool” with black kids in the school; white students who mostly hung out with black students and were sometimes referred to as “wiggers” (Kitwana, 2005; Roediger, 1998) and white students who consciously held racist ideologies and used the word in intentionally derogatory ways. At times, the first and last groups were difficult to distinguish, and perhaps even overlapped. For example, when regular white students used the N-word in racially integrated settings, the assumption of most black students was that they were attempting to be funny, rather than racist. However, some of these same students could be found using the word behind closed doors in ways that were not joking. In turn, like racial jokes, using racial slurs was a complicated endeavor with divergent implications.

### **a. Regular Whites**

The majority of white students at Jefferson were “regular whites.” I define “regular whites” as white people exposed to diverse groups of people in their daily interactions, but who ultimately go home to families, neighborhoods, and communities in which most of the people they interact with look like them. These groups are not overtly racist, but they have not managed to form deep or meaningful relationships with those from different racial backgrounds.

Although friend groups at Jefferson were racially segregated, regular whites were “cool” with people of color. They had collegial relationships within school and could often be seen talking and joking in classrooms and hallways. However, these relationships were unlikely to last beyond the doors of the school. Nonetheless, their awareness of racial difference and their surface relationships with black students made the N-word appealing to them. Regular white students used the N-word in three different ways: in racially integrated groups to show they were cool with black kids, as a joke—to amuse their peers, and at the request of black students who found it entertaining to witness the N-word come out of the mouths of white students.

The first way in which regular white students used the N-word was very similar to how black students used it among themselves. White students used the word as a greeting to signal, as Ryan described, “I’m cool with the black kids.” According to Menna, “A lot of white people are like okay with calling black people the N-word. It’s more like, ‘Oh, what’s up?’ You know what I’m saying?” In other instances, white students used the word as a greeting amongst themselves. As Brandy described, “I guess they [white kids] just picked it up like it was cool, like it meant homey. I hear one girl and she always refers to a white person as like, ‘where my N’s at?’”

While the ways in which regular white students used the N-word at times mirrored that of black students, they were not black. In turn, when they used the N-word casually in this manner there was always a risk that they would offend. This made it particularly important for the white student using the word in integrated settings to be sufficiently “cool” with the black students who heard them. As Kwesi emphasized:

You just have to be really cool with the person calling you the N-word, like really, ‘cause I don’t care if [my white friend] calls me the N-word. He be like,

“Okay, nigger,” or he be like, “That’s what’s up,” you know, just for show. That’s it. But they don’t use it often. [You have to] know you’re cool with them. If it’s a group of random blacks and then some white guy comes up and says, “What’s up niggers?” you’re gonna get in trouble. You have to know the person... If they come up to you like, “Hey nigger,” and with a serious face, I mean, they’re just trying to be racist.

The repeated emphasis of black students on being “cool” with white people who used the N-word was ironic given that virtually none of these students had significant friendships with white people. In turn, the line between “cool” and not quite cool enough was thin. Although black students repeatedly emphasized the importance of being sufficiently “cool” with white people who used the N-word, in reality virtually none of the black students were all that “cool” with white kids because, as has been noted, they were not really friends. Nonetheless, black students believed that when white students were sufficiently “cool” they could and should be allowed to say the N-word. If they were not, there was the possibility for conflict and confrontation. Arguably, the line between “cool” and not quite cool enough, was a thin one.

Other regular white students used the word because they thought it was amusing and would entertain those around them. Danny was one of these students. He said, “I use the N-word sometimes. Just usually messing around. I never say it like seriously and I never use it like as a term of endearment or like calling a friend like, ‘What up nigga?’ like that. I’ll just be joking and I’ll just use the N-word or something.” Brittany, agreed that a lot of white students used the word to be funny. She said, “Sometimes, they’re being funny, like they’ll use it with the A at the end you know. And like some black kids are okay with that and they’ll be laughing too.” In these cases, white students distinguished between “nigger,” a racist slur, and “nigga,” a term of endearment among black folks. By using the term with an “a” at the end, they were momentarily appropriating black culture in a way that others found amusing (Kennedy, 2002).

The final way in which regular white students used the N-word in integrated spaces was at the request of black students who found it amusing. Molly, a popular white student who was involved in a number of different sports said, “My black friends I have, they laugh if I say it. I’ve only said it like twice but they think it’s funny when I say it to sound like them.” While she also thought it was funny when she said it, some part of her

felt awkward as well. “It’s weird isn’t it?” she continued. “I mean some people are like, white people can’t say it, and then other people will say, ‘Oh it’s okay, I don’t care if you say it as long as you’re not calling me that, like being disrespectful to me,’ which I would never do that, so they don’t care.” Molly knew that the rules of which white people were allowed to say the word and under which circumstances were at times contradictory, as did Sarah who told a similar story:

My boyfriend sometimes uses it, just like kidding around ‘cause he’s friends with like a lot of black people and black people kid around. They made my friend, who is Asian, like a black card. Like, “Here, use our black card. You can do what you want now.” It says like...[she] is black now. Like they’re just kidding around, but so then my boyfriend’s always like, “Well, I got a black card now, I can do it.” I’m like, “No you can’t.”

Molly and Sarah both referenced instances in which white students were encouraged and given permission to use the N-word by black students. Arguably, the encouragement of these black students made white students more confused about the racial politics of the word. Both of these young ladies had independently concluded that, if left to their own accord, they would not find it appropriate to use the word. They struggled with how to make sense of the invitation of black students, which contradicted these assumptions.

### **b. Wiggers**

The white students who used the N-word most overtly, and with the least risk, were those often referred to as “wiggers.” In “What to Make of Wiggers” Roediger (1998) defines “wigger” as a racial slur delineating “‘white niggers’ or whites acting ‘too black’” (p. 360). Wiggers had majority black friends and adopted the style and cultural performances that students largely associated with blackness—primarily through clothing and language. Many “wiggers” came from lower socio-economic backgrounds and connected with the urban culture of black youth. Others had been exposed to black folks through familial and communal connections. Some had previously attended majority black schools, or had grown up in neighborhoods that were predominantly black. While not always the case, previous relationships with African Americans made it more likely that a white student would cross-racial boundaries.

According to Madison, who once considered herself a “wigger,” wiggers were people who “think they’re black.” These students, “wear their pants down their knees,

you know, Air Forces. They just like, not to use the word ghetto in vain, but like, they just kind of talk like that, like [they] use slang and things like that and then like they dress wearing like South Pole.” Jessica, a white student, had a similar description of wiggers. She said they are “the white people that try to act black and stuff. They’re all like freshed out and stuff, with the clothes and a straight hair style, and like they listen to like rap constantly and stuff.” Wiggers were students whose ascribed racial identities did not match their racial performance. As Madison and Jessica described, there were certain brands of apparel, ways of dressing, and styles of speech associated with whiteness and blackness. At Jefferson, listening to rap, sagging, wearing certain brands of clothing and presenting as “urban” were the exclusive domains of black students (see Chapter 5). When white students presented in these ways their racial whiteness dissipated.

Because wiggers had close relationships with black students and performed their racial identities in ways that read as “black,” many of these students were categorized as such in the racial order of the school. As a result, wiggers were able to use the N-word in a way that regular white kids could not, because as, Jessica said, “they’re one of them.” Madison agreed that, “Most of them are very close friends with black people. So, I think black people just, they don’t care and they allow them to [use the N-word].” Collin, a white male student, said that Cameron (the student who had been involved in the fight) was one of these students:

Yeah, white Cameron, that’s what we call him. That’s not a racist thing but that’s just something with our friends that we do. But uh, he’ll go and say to everybody ‘What up my n---er,’ and they don’t get offended. That’s why I was saying, some [white] kids can say it and they won’t get offended. Like if he were to say it to a black person they wouldn’t get offended.

Black students also used the N-word more freely with wiggers as an indication of their acceptance of these students as culturally and performatively “black.” For example, Kaleem, a black student, said “black people call white people nigger sometimes. Like, ‘That’s my nigger.’ No one really takes that as [offensive].” Victoria, a black female student agreed. She initially told me that in her experience, “you don’t really see like a white person saying [the N-word] to a black person,” but then made an exception, “then again I’ve seen some black people saying it to white people,” she said. “But that’s just like the white person who dresses black...and they’re like close like that and again using

it in a friend way.” In turn, if you were a white student who performed racially as “black,” and hung out socially with black kids, you were given much of the leeway and permissions that black students had when it came to racial interactions.

In the case of both regular white kids and wiggers, the N-word was used as a symbol of connection with black students or black culture. Both groups used the word in integrated settings in ways black students either begrudgingly accepted or explicitly encouraged. The third category of white students used the word very differently.

### **c. Racists**

While most of the ways in which white students used the N-word were presumed to be innocent and amusing, white students also used the N-word in explicitly derogatory ways, often behind closed doors. I consider these students “racists.” There has been a significant body of literature on what constitutes “racism” (Blum, 2002; Bobo & Charles, 2009; Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Mullings, 2005; Omi & Winant, 2009; Pollock, 2008). Many scholars of race argue that in the context of the United States, most white people hold racial biases; and because of their privileged position in the racial hierarchy these biases are backed by power. This combination of “prejudice” plus “power,” is the commonly accepted definition of racism (Tatum, 2003, 2007). Arguably, most all of the white students at Jefferson had some level of racial prejudice and by nature of their whiteness had racial power by nature of their whiteness. In other words, most all of them could have been defined as “racist.” However, I am using “racist” in this dissertation as a convenient way to indicate those students, teachers, administrators and families who were *conscious* of and *explicit* about their disdain for those from racially different backgrounds. Unlike regular whites, “racists” did not conceptualize the world or their school as a place in which “everyone got along” nor did they think everyone *should* get along. Instead, they wanted to maintain, and in some instances reverse, the racial status quo in ways that protected their social positions.

Some racist students admitted their disdain for their black peers in racially segregated spaces. Others publically declared their racism. For example, Curtis, a white male student said he knew some of his peers did not like black people because, “they say it.. There was this one kid...he went here last year. And he was in the cafeteria and he

stood up and just said the N-word out loud and was like, 'I hate you,' and then he just got jumped by a bunch of black kids." Curtis' story challenged the assumption that the N-word was universally presumed to be a joke. Not only did he observe white students using the word in racist ways, he also spoke of black students reacting to the word with real anger and violence.

### **3. There are no White Slurs: In Other Words, We're Better Than You**

Like racial jokes, racial slurs that targeted white students were not prevalent at the school. Again, this meant that white students were not at risk of being verbally bullied as a result of their race in the same way that black students were. On some occasions, white people were called "crackers," "honkeys," and "snow bunnies." However, black students rarely approached white students and used racial slurs. Black male students also occasionally called white male students "white boy" in a derogatory way. These interactions were not presumed to be joking. As Willie, a black student, describes, "People will call a white person a white boy or something like that and then they won't say anything back or they'll just keep walking or ignore it and they might feel offended." However, students said that this happened infrequently.

The one-way nature of racial slurs allowed white students to maintain a system of racial superiority while blaming black people for their own oppression. Bethany, a white student, was especially critical of her black peers who used the N-word. "I think it's ignorant," she said. "Like there's no need to use that word, and if you're not gonna let everyone say it then why do you say it? Like we don't call each other crackers." Black students also thought poorly of their own racial group for engaging in behavior that white students managed to avoid. As Menna put it, "I don't really hear the white people calling each other anything questionable." Winnie agreed. "I'm not going to be like the language police, but you don't hear white people calling each other cracker," she said. "I mean, like there really aren't that many derogatory terms for white people so I mean like even if there were, I don't think you'd hear white people calling each other names." Winnie's assessment that there were not many derogatory terms for white people was inaccurate. There were many more derogatory terms for white students than for black students. However, these terms lacked the intensity, hostility, and historical pain associated with

the N-word. Moreover, when a white student said these things—an admittedly less common occurrence—they were not presumed to indicate anything negative about their group as a whole.

Because white students almost never used racial slurs within their own group, they believed there was something inherently deficient about black people who did—a deficiency white people did not have. Interestingly, white students did not find themselves to be equally ignorant for making racial jokes about other groups, nor did they consider themselves to be racist for doing so. While black students were thought of as “ignorant,” by black and white students alike, for using racial slurs, white students were thought of as “funny,” “cool” and “post-racial” when “jokingly” using them.

#### **IV. MAKING MEANING OF RACIAL HUMOR**

Students made meaning of the dominant culture of racial humor in three different ways. The majority colluded with the dominant culture by claiming these interactions were post-racial. Other students were ambivalent about the interactions and admitted they thought they might be problematic. However, they were unable and unwilling to interrupt their peers. Finally, some students were openly angry about the humor. While students had different ideological interpretations of racial humor, in all three frames they felt silenced in their abilities to raise these issues among their peers. In turn, despite the various ways in which students were making meaning of these interactions, in practice the culture of racial humor was almost never interrupted or challenged.

##### **A. Racial Humor is Post-Racial?**

Although the content of their interactions was decidedly racial, many students believed jokes and slurs were evidence that society was beyond race. Raymond explained:

...If you can go up to somebody and tell them a racial joke about their race and have them tell one about your race, and if you can have that, then that shows how much America and everybody in society has grown, because in the 60s if somebody did that, somebody else would be ready to fight. Heck 20 years ago somebody would be ready to fight. Like, we're growing up in a different time where this racial profiling happens to be okay. And the racial jokes and everything, it's made to be okay by television shows and stuff like that. And I mean we just know, alright what they did back then, they were fighting about

race, but God created us all equally. Why can't we just laugh at other things that, you know, other people did? Why can't we just like make jokes about it? We're beyond that. I don't think it's a problem. It's good to see that we can all just make jokes about each other. I mean...that's cool.

Raymond argued that racism was a thing of the past, that joking about it was evidence of this fact, and that it was ultimately “cool” that students were able to interact with each other across race in ways that would have been offensive in a previous era. These conclusions were repeated over and over again by students from different racial backgrounds trying to make sense of racial humor.

However, students' claims that they lived in post-racial world, were repeatedly couched in hyper-racialized explanations. Winnie argued that most students at Jefferson didn't really “see” race. “Like no one really sees it like that,” she explained. “Like you have jokes like, I say to my Korean friend, ‘Oh whatever, you probably bleeding soy sauce,’ and they make fun of me because I'm African American and white. You know it's like, people don't really think about race as an issue. It's just not really noticed.” However, this claim that no one sees race completely contradicted her examples. Her friends were hyper-aware of race and racial differences and often used these markers as the topic of conversation in a way they did not do with other identities.

A number of students idealized hyper-racialized interactions as being aligned with a progressive narrative, of which the President himself was the symbol. Alan, a white student, said that the election of President Obama had made racial jokes more acceptable. “It's more socially welcome because of Obama,” he said. “And like how he's uniting everyone...We're following that into the school.” Like the newly elected president, students believed racial humor was a unifying illustration that they were able to cross racial divides that seemed impossible to overcome in previous generations. Adopting this sentiment, a number of black students believed that N-word simply no longer held weight. Felicia, a very social and popular African American student, said she was not offended by the N-word because, “Everybody is pretty much cool nowadays. So you can be like, ‘Man, shut your white tail up.’ And they be like, ‘Okay, blackie.’ You know stuff like that, and I think that's cool.” Because things were “cool nowadays” Felicia ultimately believed the N-word was comparable to other curse words, and found it no more problematic when white students said it than when black students did.

Jada, had similar feelings about the word:

I haven't been no slave working on no farm so I just don't feel like I've been offended by [the N-word]. But a lot of black people are like, "They can't call me that, they can't say that, they white, they can't say that." And it's like they try to say, "Well, when we was in slavery..." You were never in slavery! Like maybe your ancestors thousands of years ago might have been, but you weren't.

Like a number of students at Jefferson, Jada believed the history of racism in the U.S. to be longer than it actually was. Her analysis indicates that the collective memory of the black experience had not been adequately passed down to students at Jefferson. Despite the fact Jada admitted some students were offended by whites' usage of racial slurs, like most students in the school, she believed racial oppression was a part of a deep and irrelevant historical past, rather than something that permeated their own daily interactions. She did not believe the usage of racial slurs to be indicative of continued racial bias and stereotypes in which she was being targeted.

A number of students talked about being proud of racial jokes. Molly said, "I think we make a lot of jokes. I'm glad that we do cause I think it's breaking down barriers maybe that we can all laugh at each other and not feel like, 'What did you just say to me?' and not get mad about it. I think it's kinda cool." According to Molly, the ability to joke about race and not become angry symbolized that students were truly learning to get along across difference, despite the fact that students were not forming close bonds across racial identity.

Similar to Raymond in the opening narrative, Matt a white student, considered the interactions to be indicative of a new kind of racialized entertainment unrelated to racism. Matt understood that for a lot of adults, the interactions of young people in his generation seemed problematic. However, he insisted, "I think like this generation has built like a specific type of humor." He said, "When I'm with my mom or...I'm with my friends, we'll be making jokes that they'll be totally confused about. Like it makes total sense for us. I think it's just what we've built." Young people like Matt believed their specific form of racial humor was innovative in ways that adults could not understand.

In large part, whites thought racial humor was acceptable because they believed there were no longer any racial barriers to overcome. For example, Bethany said, "I don't think anything is racist. Nothing in the world. Like who's actually being serious about

something like that these days?...The people I've told jokes to just laugh. 'Cause like it's not that big of a deal. They're just jokes. Laugh. There's no reason to be offended and if you are offended, sorry. Like why were you here?" Danny had a very similar analysis of those who were offended by racial jokes. He said, "I never take them seriously. That's what they are, they're just jokes. And I've never met anyone who takes them seriously. Everybody does the jokes. They're just funny jokes. I mean obviously I'm not gonna be serious when I tell a black joke or something. It's just because it's funny." While he acknowledged that some people did get offended by the jokes, like Bethany, he saw this as an individual shortcoming rather than indicative of the jokes as problematic. "Yeah definitely a lot of people get offended," he said. "I just don't associate with those people 'cause it's an...irrational thing... 'cause they shouldn't get offended at it. I'm obviously not serious. I obviously don't want to kill black people. I'm just making a joke. I don't know. They take things too seriously." The sentiment that when it came to racial humor, those who were offended had the problem, rather than those who were the perpetrators, was prevalent at Jefferson (Ferguson & Ford, 2004). The school climate was one in which students were expected to brush things off, to assume nothing was a big deal, and to find humor in their own denigration. Moreover, many students—black and white—did not believe whiteness was connected to any power or privilege. In turn, making "black jokes" or using racial slurs was, to them, not connected to any kind of hierarchical racial order or structures of inequality. To the contrary, many argued that these systematic inequities no longer existed.

Combined, these factors made it very difficult to challenge racial humor in a way that did not negatively reflect on individuals who couldn't "take the joke." As white students making these claims, these young people gave themselves permission to determine the parameters of racial acceptability and offense. Because *they* were not offended by their actions, and because they were white, they had authority to determine whether or not the black students they were targeting were acting rationally. They felt justified in making this determination without regard for or understanding of larger societal trends of racial inequality and discrimination. They could make off-handed remarks about wanting to *kill* black people, and then accuse black people who were upset by these remarks of being overly sensitive. In turn what Jefferson students meant by

being “post-racial” was that white students had permission to be racist but black students did not have permission to be affected by it in any way. The burden of being “beyond race” was on the backs of blacks.

### **B. “I Don’t Want to be a B-Word About it”: Conflicted about Racial Humor**

Despite colluding with racial humor in public, behind closed doors many black students admitted to feeling conflicted. They laughed along but also felt a deep sense of uncertainty about whether or not they should be offended. Bianca’s sentiments capture this duality. When reflecting on hearing white people make racial jokes, she said, “Sometimes, I’m like, ‘ugh, you just disgust me. Like why would you...where...who would tell you this type of joke for you to know this type of joke? Somebody had to make up a joke like this.” However, she went on to say, “Sometimes it’s funny. I think it’s good that like you feel comfortable [enough] with somebody [of] a different race that you...crack little jokes. When it gets to the point where it’s like a huge deal, then I think it’s not funny anymore.” When asked what the difference was between racial jokes that were offensive and those that were funny, she said, “Because the little joke is a nudge and a laugh and you move on to the next subject. A big thing is, you want to hear a black joke, you want to hear another one, you want to hear another one, you’re black, I’m white, duh, duh, duh, duh. Like, the longer it carries on the more tired of it you get.” This idea of “duration” being an indicator of the level of the offense was common. Many students claimed to be okay with the occasional racial joke. However, when these jokes were repeated over and over again, their amusement ended. This shift in attitude indicates that the jokes, as originally told, were problematic; they were simply easier to laugh off in small doses.

Willie, a black student, admitted that his relationships with particular white students contributed to the ambivalence he felt regarding racial humor. He said, “I know a white guy, he’s real cool, you know. He makes some black jokes or whatever, but he’s...you know it depends on the relationship cause me and him is cool; you know he’s cool with a lot of other black students too so everybody sort of, they’ll laugh at him and basically it’s just whatever.” When asked if he was offended by this student’s jokes he said, “I’m not really, I’m not offended, but you know sometimes when I hear it, you

know it offends me a little bit, but it's not that big of a deal." For Willie the question of "offense" was a complex one. Because the perpetrator was someone Willie thought of as "cool"—someone with whom he had a relationship that he valued, albeit a surface one—it was difficult for him to justify finding the jokes problematic. Although he admitted that sometimes he was offended, he quickly brushed off this feeling and concluded "it's not that big of a deal." This was a common experience for black students. Black students often talked about being upset by racial humor and then convincing themselves they had no right to be. "Coolness," like post-racial narratives, gave white students permission to cross-racial taboos and took away black students' power to call them on it.

In *Understanding Whiteness* Frances Kendall (2006) says that white privilege by its very nature allows white people "not to see race in [themselves] and to be angry at those who do" (p. 67). In its "post-racial" incarnation, white privilege not only allowed for white students at Jefferson to overlook the ways in which they were racialized beings, it also gave them permission to highlight the racial identities and presumed inadequacies of their peers of color without consequence. Targeted students who found the actions of their white peers problematic were dismissively told to lighten-up—further evidence of the privilege of those targeting them (p. 70). Ultimately, the prevalence of racial jokes perpetrated by white students wore down the defenses of black students whose internal barometers told them something was astray and they were the targets. As a result, many black students were reluctant to speak publically about how they felt. They did not want to be perceived as being overly sensitive and feared that if they interrupted the racial hostilities it would suggest that they had not moved beyond race.

In the following exchange, Brandy, admits her ambivalent feelings about how to respond to racial humor. I asked how she felt about racial jokes and slurs. She said:

*Brandy:* I guess, I guess I don't care.

*Shayla:* But you seemed bothered.

*Brandy:* I am but I feel like if I show that I care maybe I'm gonna seem like I'm being a B-word about it I guess. If other people don't care I'm just gonna be the odd girl out the bunch.

She admitted that when she was younger, she had been very insulted by the jokes and slurs, but had gotten over this sentiment, "because it started becoming so common. It

was like I can't stop it, they're gonna do what they do regardless, and I have to be around it every day. So I said, if everyone else is cool with it I guess I have no choice but to be." It was clear in Brandy's words that she was very unsure about her feelings regarding the jokes and slurs. It was also clear that there was immense pressure in the school to go along with these practices. This pressure not only manifested in individual interactions, it was also present in instances in which white students were targeting black students who seemingly had more collective power in the moment. Brandy told the following story about feeling immobilized when a white student used the N-word toward a group of black students:

I know this one girl, she's really cool, I love her to death, but one day she came up to a group of African American students, we were in a circle, and she came up to us and she said, "what's up my N's?" and I guess it took us a minute to realize what she had just said and we kind of all just looked at each other. And then we looked at her like did you really just say that? And I don't know I guess we really didn't want to fight, beat her up or nothing, but we didn't know what to say. We didn't want to seem like, old school and say, you know, don't say it. It seems like we should have said something and we all should have like said, "no, that's not cool, you took it too far," but we didn't. It was weird.

In this instance, a group of black students were ultimately silenced by one white student. Again, the sense that the white student was "really cool" was a part of the struggle the black students faced. Although all of the African American students were offended by the white students' usage of the N-word, none of them felt comfortable expressing their feelings. They were more concerned with protecting the feelings of white students who engaged in offensive behavior, than in protecting their own. Moreover, as Brandy explained, they worried that if they were to interrupt these behaviors, they would seem "old school"—they would seem like they were stuck in a racial past that "cool" white students had clearly moved beyond.

This story also spoke to the very limited skills students possessed for addressing conflict and racial discrimination. While Brandy ultimately concluded that she should have "said something," her initial response was to do nothing or fight. Because their options seemed so limited, black students often found themselves in a conundrum. Since most of them were not prone to physically attacking students from different racial

backgrounds, their default response was silence. Perhaps unknowingly, their silence endorsed the actions of white students they felt assaulted by.

Willie, also struggled to navigate how he should intervene when white students engaged in racial humor. He said, “I feel like I should say something, but then I feel like they’ll just say, ‘oh, I’m just kidding,’ or ‘I’m just playing.’ But sometimes people try to, they might take it far, but I just feel like I should say something, but then I feel I shouldn’t or it’s not that serious or something.” The “humor” that had been attached to racism in the larger school culture made Willie hesitant to challenge the behaviors of white students. If they claimed to be joking when they used racial slurs or made derogatory racial comments, black students felt they had no recourse—they also had to find humor in these interactions or risk being labeled overly sensitive. I pushed Willie to consider what would happen if he did say something. He responded “I don’t know. If I said anything to them like, that offends me or that offends people, I think they wouldn’t say it or do it anymore.” When asked why he didn’t try this method since he seemed to think it would be effective, he said, “I don’t know.” Brandy and Willie were two students very much aware of the ambivalence of their feelings about racial jokes and slurs. They knew they did not like these interactions, but did not feel they had the power, skill, or support to interrupt them. As a result, their actions mostly sanctioned the hyper-racialized culture in the school.

White students were also conflicted about racial humor. A number of them who opposed the interactions were hesitant to interrupt them. Their hesitance largely stemmed from concern that becoming involved in any way would lead to racial conflict. They were aware that many black students were angered by the slurs and jokes and did not want to risk being the targets of that anger.

Curtis was a lower-income white male student who had attended majority black schools through middle-school. A former wigger at the time of this study he was on the swim team and had really improved his behavior and academics. He said that he thought it was unacceptable for white students to use racial slurs and even said that black students had the right to use physical violence if white students were disrespecting them. However, he was not willing to interrupt his white peers who engaged in this behavior. He said, “I just stay out of it. I ain’t getting into that; ‘Cause I don’t feel like having to

fight a whole bunch of black kids for no reason.” When asked why he would have to fight if he was encouraging the white students to stop engaging in racial humor he said, “Because I’m in it, I’m involved in it. I mean it’s not smart to do that.” Curtis was not the only white student opposed to racial humor. He said, “I think there’s a lot of people in here that feel that way, but don’t say anything about it.” In turn, while black students were scared of seeming too sensitive if they interrupted racial discrimination, white students were fearful of retaliation from black students if they did so.

Ironically, white students who challenged racial joking were more likely to get resistance from other white students, than from black students. Madison, a lower-income white female student said that she had attempted to interrupt her white peers who used racial slurs to little avail. She recalled an incident in which she asked a white student not to use the N-word around her, “He said that I am not his boss and he can say whatever he wants to say. And I was just like, well, can you at least be respectful towards me? I was like, you can say it in front of whoever you want, just please be respectful to me and not say it in front of me. And he’s just like okay.” While he acquiesced to her request in the moment, he continued to use the word around her in the future. Many white students met resistance when they confronted their peers. As a result, they felt they had little power to make lasting change, even within their own social circle making the risk of standing up not worth it.

### **C. I’m Not Their Nigger: Black Rage**

Some black students retained their anger about racial humor despite social pressure to laugh it off. This was especially true for black students who had previously attended school in majority black districts. Dwayne and Shawn were black male students who had spent their formative schooling years in the City. Dwayne moved to Jefferson at the beginning of middle school because he often got into trouble in school and his mother wanted to give him a fresh start. He lived in one of the more popular subdivisions in Jefferson with his mother, step-father and three younger siblings. Shawn had transferred to the district at the beginning of 11<sup>th</sup> grade. He had gone to another suburban school the previous year because his mother was dissatisfied with the environment and school system in the City. Like Dwayne, he lived with his mother, step-father, and a younger

sibling. Although Dwayne and Shawn were similar in many ways—race, gender, educational history, city of origin—their connection ended at these markers of identity.

Dwayne was a popular student who was often in trouble. He struggled academically, but excelled socially. He was also fairly well off financially with access to a car, new clothes, and other material markers of wealth. While he was not a large young man, he was undeniably perceived as intimidating. He did not smile easily, or form connections with those different from him, and he had a piercing gaze. It was clear that he had an edge that students who had grown up in Jefferson lacked. He used the N-word frequently with other black students in his social circle. To many white students, and teachers, he looked like trouble a mile away. He was also very openly homophobic.

Shawn was one of the few openly gay black students at the school. Although also from the City, he performed his racial identity much differently than Willie. His clothes had a tighter fit, he smiled much more freely, and always looked inquisitive and open. Interestingly, although he had spent much more time in the City than Dwayne, and because everyone in his previous high school was also African American, Shawn did not feel the pressure to dress or act in a certain way in order to prove his racial identity.

For both of these young men, hearing the N-word come from the mouths of white students was shocking, angering, and difficult to understand. Dwayne's reaction was one of complete rage. Dwayne, explained:

I know some white people that be saying nigger. I mean they just say it. I mean if you say it over here I guess people don't really care, but if you go down to the City and go to the schools I went to and you're a white person and you say that you going to get your head beat. You going to get beat up. [Here] they [white kids] be like, "what up my nigger." I don't know why they calling us that. Nobody going to call me that though so it don't even matter. Because, I mean you white, you know what you did, you know what the slaves did. You know what they used to call us so why are you still calling me that cause I'm not your slave so. They can say to me, "What's up my boy." I mean they can't say nigger to me cause I'm not their nigger.

When asked how he would respond if white students directed the N-word at him, he said, "I mean if I was in the City I would've hit him. But if I'm out here I'm not going to do nothing. Because my mamma told me not to." Dwayne felt that students at Jefferson lacked the racial consciousness that students at his former school had possessed.

However, his time in Jefferson ultimately caused him to acquiesce to the cultural norms of the community. Despite his protests to me, in practice, he did not interrupt discriminatory white students any more than black students who had been in Jefferson their whole lives.

Shawn described a similar surprise at the seemingly careless ways in which students at Jefferson interacted across race. While equally upset, as a student newer to the district, Shawn talked about feeling uneasy about the very different cultural norms:

Like the white kids will say nigger and the black kids will say honky. I don't say it though. I find it sort of degrading, making fun of each of the races, even though like they're playing, but I don't get into that. It's not something to play about because of the history...Like my fourth hour class it's some pretty rough white kids in there...It's like, they look like they came from the hood, and those white kids will say it and I just find it weird. Like, it's okay, and then the black kids will interact with them saying the word. I can't do it. They interact with them saying the N-word. I don't know, I guess because they grew up with them...they really don't care....A black kid, he said, "I mean it's okay. We friends. We grew up together, so why not?" I guess because I didn't grow up with them and whatever and I really don't know them, so I still don't think they should use the word.

Shawn simply could not wrap his head around the interactions happening at Jefferson. To him, they crossed the line. White was white, and a wigger saying the word was no more acceptable than a regular white kid saying it. Moreover, unlike students who claimed that the N-word was no longer rooted in any substantive history, Dwayne and Shawn called on the history of the word as the foundation of their anger.

Other students reported having to exhibit a significant amount of self-control when they witnessed racial joking. Chris, an African American male, said that he often felt so upset by racial jokes he had to "just walk away" when he heard them so that he wouldn't "put myself in a situation where I have to use violence." However, not all students had this degree of self-control. Ahmed, a black male student, said many black students "get mad and they act crazy. The black guy is ready to fight the [white] kid just 'cause of like, I don't know it's like our race is extra sensitive." He acknowledged the anger that some black students felt, but ultimately couched it in collusion by determining that black students were too sensitive, rather than that there was something problematic about the black jokes directed at them.

Black students' espoused anger was often in conflict with their daily interactions with white students. Felicia gave a particularly poignant example of this contradiction when discussing her reaction to discovering her white friends used the N-word in segregated spaces:

I was talking to three white students. I always play with my friends like, "Oh, that's racist." We just be playing around and she was like, "I don't want to sit by you." And I was like, "Oh, so you racist? It's just 'cause I'm black." But then my friend was like, he just brought up the subject of like, "Oh, what's up my N," and all that. And I'm like, "Excuse me?!" I just don't like it when white people say the N-word, it's not right. I just don't feel right, it doesn't sound right coming out they mouth, that's what I'm trying to say. Because okay, like back in the day, it was only meant for black people. A nigger, meaning ignorant. So, if you say that then basically you're calling your friends ignorant. [So] I told my friend, "Don't say that," and he was like, "Oh, I say it all the time." And I was like, "Why would you say that?" and he was like, "I say it all the time." I was like, "No you don't." He was like, "Yeah, I say it all the time around my friends." I was like, "Say it." He was like, "Nah." I was like, "Why not? You just told me you say it all the time, why can't you say it around me?" [He said], "Oh, 'cause you're going to hit me." [So I said], don't say it at all because, then I told him that their people used to say that to us back in the day, calling us ignorant and all that stuff, so don't say it now. And I was like, "Just say it now," and he said it real fast, but I didn't catch it, but I told him to say it again and he said, "No." Then the other boy, he said it and I jawed him. I punched him. I punched him in his chest.

Felicia's experience captured the feelings and experiences of many black students at the school. She was "cool" with white students and considered many of them to be friends. She even engaged in racial joking with them. However, she was also upset when they crossed the line. She said initially they were joking about race, "just to make each other laugh" but then it got serious when they "started calling each other out of our names." In part, it was this lack of clarity about the boundaries that created racial tension in the school. Nonetheless, despite the fact that Felicia told me she was very angry that he had used the word, and told him as much, afterwards she laughed. Like many students at the school, she used humor to deflect from the true hurt she felt about the interaction. This was a tactic black students often had to adopt. They used humor to maintain some semblance of self-worth and feeling of validation in situations in which attacks on their identity were being sanctioned.

#### **D. Testing the Racial Waters: Reproduction or Transcendence?**

Engaging in racial humor was a risky endeavor. Students were aware that there was a fine line between socially acceptable banter and racism—a line that Pamela said was “not very clear sometimes.” If directed at the wrong person, said in the wrong tone, or mentioned at the wrong moment, racial humor could lead to verbal and, on rare occasions, physical altercations. Moreover, students’ own meaning-making of these interactions suggested that despite the dominant acceptability of racial humor, these interactions were actually highly contentious.

Although jokes were told in integrated settings, white students revealed that they also frequently told racial jokes in racially homogenous groups—especially those they considered to be most offensive. In turn, despite assertions like that of Matt that jokes were evidence of the fact that “it’s really accepting here,” students were aware that some of these jokes crossed the line. It was this disconnect between students’ professed ideologies that racism was “a joke,” and their awareness of the problematic nature of racial humor that made Jefferson an interesting and dangerous site of inter-racial interaction.

White students who used racial humor were aware of the risk, and often cited it as a reason why they were cautious about the settings in which they engaged in this behavior. For example, Leah felt that most white students said the N-word in homogenous settings, “I don’t think that they would actually say it to them because you know no one wants to like get beat up.” Danny, one of the white students who had admitted using the N-word, said that he was cautious about where he said it. “I definitely know that there’s some [people] I don’t want to say it in front of,” he said. “Usually it’s easy to tell ‘cause they look kind of like they’re just thugs and they’re ready to kick your ass ‘cause you just said the N-word. Or they’ll get really offended or they’ll get up in your face and I don’t want to deal with that ‘cause I’m a tiny white kid.” These words were very different from those he spoke earlier. Rather than talking about racial humor as “just a joke” and as something that no one had the right to be offended by, Danny’s comment here indicated that he was well aware of the line he was crossing. Moreover, it indicated he felt threatened particularly because of his identity as a “tiny white kid” (see Chapter 5 for more on racial intimidation).

However, despite the potential for harm, many students continued to “test the racial waters.” They simply could not resist the temptation to see which taboos they could get away with breaking. As Willie framed it, “Some people like to take things far to see how far they can get.” There was something thrilling about “tak[ing] a heated subject and mak[ing] it funny, mak[ing] it lighter,” said Victoria, not only because it challenged traditional notions of what is offensive, racist, and discriminatory, but also because these interactions were inherently all of those things. By making racial jokes and using racial slurs in light-hearted ways, students were re-appropriating racism as humor, and pushing the boundaries of acceptability. Rappoport (2005) calls this experience the “joy of transgression”—an act that “gives us license to be spontaneously bad, to violate the rules of conventional morality. This, in a way, is like the feeling of joyous abandon one may have when jumping fully clothed into a mud bath” (p. xiii). He suggests that humor of this nature provides a mental break in otherwise serious efforts to make the world a better place. However, students at Jefferson did not have another realm in which they were trying to “make the world a better place.” Nor were students engaged in an equitable exchange in which “...minority groups also enjoy a great deal of protective self-critical humor, as well as jokes aimed at the mainstream majority” (p. 2). Instead, there were no white jokes, there were not white slurs, and there was no social justice project. In situations such as this, the joy of transgression comes at a serious price.

A number of scholars have found that humor that disparages people based on race has negative social impact (Ferguson & Ford, 2004; Howitt & Owusu-Bempah, 2005). As Ferguson and Ford (2004) argue, “by making light of the expression of prejudice, disparagement humor communicates a message of tacit approval or tolerance of discrimination against members of the targeted group” ultimately reinforcing the social acceptability of negative stereotypes (p. 91). Others have found that racial humor is often the serious expression of bias on behalf of racially intolerant individuals and groups (Billings, 2001; Davidson, 1987). As Billings (2001) argues, despite the claims of jokers, humor is not an activity devoid of hatred, nor is hatred devoid of humor. Rather there is “an intrinsic link between extreme political hatred and the realm of jokes” (p. 268). In fact, humor often provides cover for racists who can “be brave without acting. They can

be murders in their imagination” (p. 286). They can threaten to “kill” black people without ramification.

This desire to push the boundaries, to rebel, to see how far they could go, was not unique to Jefferson High School. Instead, adolescents are in developmental stages in which they are forming many of their identities, beliefs and worldviews (Tatum, 2003). White students who attend integrated schools are also likely to be thinking about racial difference and identity as they learn to navigate cross-racial relationships. Nonetheless, students newer to the area believed that the extent to which Jefferson students pushed the boundaries of race seemed excessive. Stephanie, a white female student who had attend a much more racially diverse high school said, “When I came here, it was it was like putting me into like an ice cold bucket of water because I was just like shocked. I couldn’t believe it.” The ways in which students at Jefferson interacted around race were not aligned with how students had behaved in her previous school.

Similarly, Robyn was a student with a Puerto Rican father and a white mother. As she explains, she identified primarily as white: “I’m white, but my dad is half or full Puerto Rican, but my mom is mixed white and basically white. And I came out looking more like her. I just got the dark hair from my dad and so I guess I say I’m white.” She had lived in a number of different states on the east coast and in the south where she had attended schools that were predominantly black and Filipino. Jefferson, where she moved her sophomore year, was her third high school. At the time of the interview she was a senior. Like Stephanie she was surprised by the racial interactions at Jefferson:

I’ve noticed up here, like although everyone says down in the south they’re more racists. It’s actually more of an equal level compared to up here. It’s like I’ve noticed there’s a lot more racial slurs and racial favoritism and like people stereotype. They’ll stereotype by the way a person talks or the way a person walks or the way they sag their pants. And then you have like the white people, they’ll make jokes and what-not towards them [black people] and it’s like dude you don’t know them, don’t say anything... Like they’ll [white kids] say like really mean remarks. Like for instance slavery and like monkey and like, you don’t say that kind of stuff, ever!

Robyn had been socialized in a cultural setting in which it was simply unacceptable to say things that were racist. Claiming that you were “joking” did not create exceptions to the rule in her eyes.

Students like Robyn and Stephanie told a different story than the majority of their white peers. They felt the jokes reinforced stereotypes and created racial fissures between groups. They found racial humor to be both socially inappropriate and rooted in the true feelings and beliefs of students, rather than an ironic reappropriation of a racism of days past. Bianca, a black student who had transferred to the district from another state the year this study began, agreed. She said that the boldness of white student at Jefferson was unlike anything she had ever experienced:

*Shayla:* So did ya'll do this kind of stuff at your old school? Was there like these kind of...back and forth jokes?

*Bianca:* No, no, no.

*Shayla:* Why you say it like that?

*Bianca:* 'Cause it wasn't like, it was not even, it was not even cool, like for real, for a white person to crack a joke about a black person.

*Shayla:* So why you think it's different here?

*Bianca:* I have no idea. I have no clue. It's kind of like I don't know I guess 'cause you know they're...what was it the slavery you know; black people came up here, the white people up here were trying to save black people blah, blah, blah. I don't know.

*Shayla:* So these are different kinds of white folks?

*Bianca:* Right these are different white people.

*Shayla:* What kind of white people are these?

*Bianca:* These are very brave white people. (laughter) Very brave white people.

While Bianca was making many new connections at Jefferson, including dating a white boy, and wished for the world to be a melting pot, she also believed that the interactions taking place at Jefferson were playing with fire. The white students were brave in her eyes because they were crossing dangerous racial taboos. This was made even more apparent when white students began admitting the ways in which they were not only navigating race and humor with their classmates, but also racism in their families.

## V. CRACKS & FISSURES: THE RACISM UNDERLYING RACIAL HUMOR

Racism is still here...no matter what. It's still here. Racism, it's not a joke.  
-Chris, 12<sup>th</sup> grade, African American

The anger and confusion many students privately admitted feeling about racial humor cracked the façade that everyone got along and that students at Jefferson were “beyond race.” This claim was further challenged by the fact that a number of white students at the school did not make jokes lightly or think of their banter with black students as indicative of budding friendships—rather they were unequivocally racist. In addition, many regular white students who did not consider themselves to be overtly racist, disclosed having friends and family members who were. In turn, racial humor masked the explicit racism that white students were contending with in their daily lives. Because the school largely failed to intervene in the racial biases students were bringing to school, they ultimately sanctioned the reproduction of racism.

### A. White Students are Racist

Students at Jefferson were very much aware that for some of their peers, racism was not a thing of the past. According to Logan:

There's certain kids that are like, no black at all. When they're walking around they'll be like, “I hate black kids.” I think it's [because] we're kind of out...in the boons. We're out in the middle of nowhere. 'Cause you look out this school and you see field, field, field. And then you just go down the road right here and you're all woods. [So there's] more hicks.

Because the Jefferson community had been built on rural farmland, Logan assumed the white people from the area were likely to be racist. It was unclear whether or not the Jefferson community was any more racist than other places in which there had been a significant and rapid shift in racial demographics. Nonetheless, the historical narrative of Jefferson provided further ammunition for both racial humor and racism. In one of the most blatant displays of racism, Ed, a white male student reported that “Last year [there was a] gang called J Poodle that was all white boys and they [were] trying to bring the KKK back and stuff.” Although these students had graduated by the time this study began, their reputation lingered.

Students of color were aware that, for a cadre of white students, racial humor was not meant to be funny. Even students like Winnie who had fervently insisted that race is “not really noticed,” acknowledged “there’s definitely white kids who I’ve heard don’t like black people...I know there’s racism here.” However, identifying which students were actually racist was challenging to discern—perhaps because the line between students who were actually “racist,” and those who were “joking” was nowhere near as clear, neat, or solid, as students liked to think.<sup>42</sup>

White students, like Logan, claimed it was easy for them to spot their peers who were taking advantage of the racialized culture of the school to enact their racism without reprimand. He felt that “the comments that are just jokes you’ll laugh about. The people that are serious you can see like anger in their face, like how much they really don’t like black people.” However, other students believed this distinction was a false one. Gabrielle, was a white female student who came from a very racist family. She believed the majority of racial humor at the school was thinly veiled racism (Davidson, 1987). Gabrielle explained:

Yeah, they try to say it’s joking but most of it isn’t. Because you can tell. They act like they’re all serious about it and then they’ll laugh and get other people to laugh about it, but they’re not joking they’re being serious half the time. I mean, why would you make a joke about gender or race? Because they want to put other people down to feel better about themselves.

She understood that many students were engaging in this behavior, perhaps unconsciously, to solidify their own superiority. Moreover, she was able to deconstruct the laughter that accompanied the jokes as a distraction from their real message. By getting others to laugh along, the perpetrators were able to shield their intentions.

While a number of white students felt they could easily identify racism, students of color often said they struggled to make the distinction. For example, Ahmed worried that he was misinterpreting his peers’ commentary. “That’s the thing,” he said, “they try to mask it as just like humor...so I really don’t know if they mean it or not, cause it’s meant to be humorous, but you never know, they might have like an alternative motive for it, so I don’t know.” Ahmed was wise to be cautious about discerning the meaning behind white students’ racial humor. A lot of the racism of white students was

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<sup>42</sup> See previous section “Racists” on how “racist” is being operationalized in this dissertation.

clandestine, taking place behind closed doors in segregated spaces that students of color were not privy to.

Gina was a white female student who had grown up with a black-step father and half-black siblings. Most of her friends were black and she dressed “black” often wearing clothing brands such as Rocawear, which she thought were more fun and had a wider range of expression than the simple t-shirts with Abercrombie or Hollister written across the front that were popular among white students. Having black friends, adopting stereotypically black styles, and being raised by a black man, whom her white racist family targeted, gave her a heightened awareness of racial politics (Perry, 2002). Moreover, her whiteness gave her access to a world that black people could not enter. When asked about racist students at the school she said:

They’ll be using the N-word or saying like if they get mad at a black kid and they’ll use the N-word to talk about them real bad and stuff and make references to the fact that they’re black and that’s why they’re acting the way they act....There’s some kids, they don’t even talk to any black kids just ‘cause you know they’re racist. I know a lot of people like that ‘cause most of the other kids, like black kids, they don’t know how many racist people that they talk to on a day-to-day basis ‘cause they’re not white. But I would say like 40, 50% of the white kids that go here are racist...It’s a lot of people...I’ve seen it just from like...certain people that sit at my desk just they’ll say certain things and you just know, you just know that they’re racist. And then they’ll be like, “Stupid ‘N’” or something. And they’ll be just like, “See, that’s why black people don’t get this,” and little comments. And you just know right away like they’re racist. And that’s in all the classes. Like there’s somebody in every class, at least two people.

Gina’s observations were especially interesting because she was able to “lift the veil.” Many of her black friends laughed off the racist comments of their white counterparts as being post-racial. However, Gina knew this was far from the truth.

Brielle, a mixed race student, had a very similar experience. Her insight was facilitated by the fact that her mother was white, she had close relationships with white people both within and outside of school, and because in some situations, when her hair was straight, she could pass. As a result, she had access to white spaces in ways that other black students would never have. She had experienced being both the target of white racism and privy to racist conversations about black people. She talked about the complexities of multiracial identity (Rockquemore & Brunnsma, 2002a, 2002b). She noted, “I have been like dealing with it for all my life cause you know being like a mixed

kid there's a lot of problems. I mean there's a certain amount of joking and then there's like when you're sitting here calling black people the N-word and not smiling about it and meaning it, like you can tell when someone means something." Like Gina, Brielle believed there were significantly more racist white students at Jefferson than black students were aware of. She said:

There's a lot of people that are racist but they don't come out about it because there's a lot of crazy black boys here that will fight people if you say the N-word or whatever, but there definitely is a lot of old fashion rednecks and stuff in this school. A lot of them lie about it. Because they don't want people to know 'cause, like I think that it's embarrassing to them, but that's how they were raised so that's all they know. People don't just come out of the womb thinking, "Oh, I don't like certain people," it's something that you've been taught, so I think they're embarrassed maybe that their parents are stuck back in the old times when this is 2009. It's supposed to be diverse you know.

What Brielle suggested was that white students who came from racist families, and held racist beliefs, had enough self-awareness to know their ideologies were no longer socially acceptable. In turn, they went to great lengths to hide the most egregious aspects of their racial biases.

Brielle was not simply postulating about the covert racism at Jefferson, rather she had experienced first-hand the extent of racism among white students. She told the following story:

I think there's a lot of racial tension and just so much drama that's uncalled for. It's not so much with the black people, it's the white people that's parents are racist. I have a best friend who goes here and she has this ex-boyfriend... they went together for like a year and she wasn't allowed to walk with me in the hallway or else he would get mad. She wasn't allowed to talk to me when they were together. I was like sleeping over at her house and he would call, she would have to lie 'cause she would get in trouble because he didn't like me cause I was black. And he's made it clear to me before. Like in person, like I'd be walking with her, he'd go you can't walk with her, you're black and he like calls people the N-word and stuff. Everyone thought he was kidding but now that they know [he's not] they're like, "wow I would have never known that he was really like that." But then like if you meet his dad, like his dad will like broadcast it to you like, "oh, I don't like black people, can't have them in my house, can't have no girlfriend that's black, don't bring them home to me."

Many students did not believe the young man she referred to was racist because the cloak of humor was so thick, and the narrative of a post-racial world so prominent, it was hard

to see the racism underneath—especially for students who had been socialized to believe their generation had moved beyond it. Black students who laughed along with racial humor were simply unaware of the deeper feelings some white students held. In contrast, Gina and Brielle both lived on the fringes of racial groups (Turner, 1969). As Gina said, because of her background “I’m different from all my family. But I’m different from the people at school too. So nowhere I go...you can’t just categorize me in a certain place.” They had access to black and white domains in ways that few students did. As a result, they were able to paint a picture of race relations at Jefferson that was rooted in an understanding of both the surface interactions happening between students and the racism that permeated white communities.

## **B. White Families are Racist**

I guess you would say we all kind of grew up trained to be [racist]. I mean we all grew up with our own parents. Our parents all have their own personal biases and we grew up learning those biases and you just instinctively just kind of pick that stuff out.  
-Ethan, 12<sup>th</sup> grade, White

The large majority of white students at Jefferson were navigating racism in their homes and communities. Even those who were not racist themselves, reported having friends, family members, or neighbors who openly espoused racist ideologies. Arguably, this is a common white experience in America. White people in the United States are not only dealing with racism and race relations when in the presence of people of color, they are also negotiating race everyday in all-white spaces (Hartigan, 1999; Lipsitz, 1998). The precarious class position of many white families in times of economic crisis makes these sentiments even more salient (Lamont, 2000). In her study of working-class families, Rubin (1976) found:

The sense of scarcity, always a part of American life but intensified sharply by the history of...recessions, made minority gains seem particularly threatening to white working-class families...But partly because we have so little concept of class resentment and conflict in America, this anger was not directed so much at those above as at those below. And when whites at or near the bottom of the ladder look down in this nation, they generally see blacks and other minorities. (p. xxxi)

In other words, the economic success of the black families in the district, combined with the scarcity for resources in the state and country at the time of this study, heightened racial

tensions and likely increased white families' negative sentiments about their black neighbors.

Students talked about racism as an “inherited” trait—something passed down generation after generation. For example, Lauren, a black female student, said:

On our bus there's this [white] girl and me, and this boy's sister, who is black, had asked...if she liked him, 'cause she always talks to him and laughs at him and all this other stuff. And she was like, “No, I don't like him because he's black.” And [we] had asked [her], is she racist and she said, “I'm half racist because my dad is racist.” So I'm like, “Are you racist or not?” And she's like, “Well, I'm not but my dad is.” I'm like, you don't have to be what your dad is, it's what you are.

Lauren's words expressed the tension that this young lady felt about how to negotiate racial politics given the racism she lived with. The hesitance with which she answered Lauren's questions, her desire to talk to and laugh with a black male student while at the same time realizing that it would not be acceptable to actually admit interest in him, pointed to her own internal battle between the world as it was in her school and the world as it was in her home—a conundrum many white students wrestled with. Some white students responded by accepting the racism of their parents. For example, Ahmed said, “There are racist kids, I know that for a fact because you know I know a lot of parents are racist and their kids go here, obviously; you know that's where you live, that's your model.” Students who adopted their parents' racist ideologies were apparent to Ahmed. “Just the words that they use, the way they talk to people that they think they are superior or whatever,” he said. “They think they're, you know, smarter or whatever. I don't know, I don't really deal with those type of white kids I guess cause I don't want to be bothered with all that bull.”

Other students explained away the racism of their family members as protective concern—a concern that they too adopted. Gwen, a white female student reported the following:

My dad and my stepmom, they are like if you're gonna date a black person they're not gonna be at Jefferson High. And I'm like why? They just said that. I guess they think that if a black guy dates a white girl, then he's disrespectful to her and like they're probably using her for other reasons. Probably like sex and stuff. 'Cause my dad always tells me, he goes, “You know guys will tell you anything you want to hear just to get them to have sex with you.”...I guess he just, you know he's really cautious about that. Like I don't think it's really a

racist thing. You know I'm his daughter, his first one, and he's just cautious about that kind of stuff.

She was very clear that her father was cautioning her against dating black boys in particular, not boys in general. He felt that black boys were more likely to be sexually deviant than their white counterparts. However, Gwen was able to justify this as “protective” rather than racist. Moreover, she took on this “cautious” attitude for herself. She continued, “I don't know if I'd want to date any of the black people here either 'cause it's not a racist thing either. I guess it's just the whole, you know gang thing.” Gwen's comments indicated she had adopted the opinions of her parents, the school, and the larger society that black males were gang members, that they were sexually deviant, and that deciding not to date them was justifiable in ways that could be seen as something other than racist.

### **C. The Story of Madison**

The experiences of Madison, a lower-income white female was a good illustration of the struggles many white students faced in navigating the complex racial politics of their school and home lives. Madison lived with her single mother and younger sister. In addition, she had a number of siblings who were more than a decade older and had long moved out on their own. Madison was very social and was friends with white students as well as popular black students. As a result, she struggled to focus academically and had fairly low grades. In her earlier high school years she had identified as a “wigger.” While she had changed many of the behaviors that gave her this title, at the time of this study her two best friends, Brielle and Victoria, were both half black. Nonetheless, in her broader life, she regularly had to make decisions about how to address racism from her white peers. “A couple of my guy friends, they actually are very, very, very racist,” she continued:

I think it's just mainly people's opinion and how their parents raised them. [My friends] were in the car one day and we were trying to think and there was a black guy, he ran a red light or a stop sign or whatever and [my white male friend] said the N-word, he's just like going off like and I was just kind of sitting there just like, “Oh, don't say that word around me like, like I don't like that word at all.”

While Madison was as disturbed by the racism she witnessed as Ahmed and Lauren had been, she could not simply avoid racist white people or limit their interaction to the bus-ride home. They were in her friend circle and in her family. In the following excerpt, Madison talked about her mothers' budding transformation in her views of black people, the history of racism in her family, and its continual presence in her home life:

My mother actually raised my older sisters, not racist in a way, but um to like not really be best friends with them [black people], never date them or nothing like that. Now, all she works with is black people and so her opinion has changed. Like I think maybe 'cause it was back then like twenty years ago, it was different and now more and more people are together. 'Cause like actually for a while since I was in 8th grade, all I've dated was black boys. I have never dated a white boy since 7th grade. So like it's definitely changed 'cause like they've all came over. And like they actually sit on the couch and have conversations with my mom. They actually talk to my mom more than me. It makes me wonder exactly what happened, like maybe there's something that happened in her past that made her so...like I was talking to her about how I wanted to change. 'Cause like I used to be kind of like, listen to rap and thought I was a white girl that thought she was black, so I just kind of changed for my own personal things. And so we were talking about change one day and then so she kind of told me about that. 'Cause, my mom's boyfriend, he's actually very racist also and so he gets, he will drink on occasions and he will say the N-word quite a bit and so I either go in my bedroom and listen to music just really loud and so I don't have to listen to it or I just like go outside and go for a walk and just 'cause I don't like it. I don't look at how people act in a way, like I don't judge a book by its cover, I read the pages and look at what's on the inside. 'Cause like, I think it's my mom's, mom's dad, he was actually a slave owner so that kind of gets to me quite a bit, just knowing like how could actually one of my family members put somebody through that like that's just, that's horrible.

Madison viewed herself as accepting and nonjudgmental. However, she also came from a family just starting to break the cycle of racism. Her mother had raised her older sisters to avoid close relationships with black people. While her mother was becoming more open-minded as a result of her work experience and her daughters' social network, she still had a racist boyfriend who spent significant time in her home with her children who were clearly in the process of trying to figure out their own racial identity. Moreover, the entire family was living with the knowledge that they were the decedents of slave owners.

Many white students at Jefferson shared aspects of Madison's experience. They overheard racist comments and stereotypes in their homes; they knew that they had

parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles who were raised in a time where racism was common practice; and they were aware that this history was present in their daily lives. In part, the jokes they told were their attempts to separate themselves from the “racist” white people who were raising them and to assert that they were a new generation unwilling to perpetuate discrimination in the same ways.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

Stories of racism among white students and community members in Jefferson were far reaching. During my fieldwork, a white student confessed to me that her father was a KKK member who had banned her from playing with her black neighbors as a child. Another white female student said her parents would kick her out of the house if they knew she had black friends at school. Black students told me they often saw racial slurs written on the bathroom walls. I saw a white student wearing a confederate flag necklace, and there was a swastika permanently etched in the desk of a classroom I regularly observed. In the two years I was at the school the symbol was never removed, nor was the desk it was written on. The racial humor at Jefferson essentially constituted verbal racial bullying. Students with racial privilege were targeting those without it in ways that reinscribed stereotypes, and reinforced notions of white superiority.

When seen written down in succession this combination of factors seems to indicate that Jefferson was an unspeakably racist school. However, what was happening at Jefferson was not unique. Rather, these are the kinds of discursive interactions that schools nation-wide find so easy to ignore and discount. If you walked the hallways and sat in the classrooms of Jefferson on an average day, it did not look much different from any integrated suburban high school. Students laughed, joked, forgot their homework, hugged their teachers, got into arguments, and claimed they hated and loved school. It was precisely the familiarity of Jefferson—a place that more often than not felt like a quintessential American high school—that made what was happening so disturbing, and so significant.

The racial tensions and hostilities there did not form in a bubble. They were not the product of Jefferson alone, rather they stemmed from the continuing dilemma of “the color line” that permeates the nation as a whole (Du Bois, 1903). From 1989 to 2009

Jefferson grew exponentially. Families moved into the district from all over the state and country for bigger homes and “safer” neighborhoods. As a result, the culture of Jefferson was developed and cultivated by young people who had come from many different backgrounds and had various lived experiences around race and class. When placed in a diverse public school environment, these students—some who had been in Jefferson all of their lives, many who had not—collectively developed norms of behavior about what would and would not be acceptable, which words could and could not be said, and what kinds of racial jokes were and were not funny. Students from schools, communities, and states with varying levels of diversity too often found themselves engaging in hyper-racialized behavior—making a little joke, acquiescing to the request of a peer to “test out” the N-word, laughing along at the drawing of a bomb on the a chalkboard next to the name of an Arab student. When young people from different backgrounds were brought together at Jefferson, racism seemed to be the least common denominator. Diversity unmediated, led to both increased interactions across difference and, unfortunately, more opportunities for the perpetuation of discrimination.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **The Racial Heavy: Racial Performance, Cultural Racism and Physical Bullying**

#### **I. INTRODUCTION**

At Jefferson, student interactions across race were not only rooted in discursive exchanges in which racist humor was re-formatted as progress, race was also embodied and performed in ways that caused tension and conflict. Not unlike hyper-racialized discourse, the ways in which black and white students inhabited physical space led to stereotyping and bullying of another form. In particular, the cultural performances of black students were considered socially dominant in ways that white students found threatening, and at the same time seen as the measure of coolness. This duality of blackness as both menacing and enviable was one that black students exploited in order to assert their own racial humor—a humor that was not discursive, but rather embodied. However, white students did not find these performances amusing. They talked of fearing and resenting black students. Black students simultaneously admitted wrestling with how to make sense of who and what they were, often succumbing to the stereotypes and racism they faced in the school, community and popular media. The result was a rigid cultural divide that led to racial segregation and served to sanction racial bias in ways that were neither light nor joking.

#### **II. EMBODIED RACIAL PERFORMANCE: ACTING BLACK/ACTING WHITE**

...a student's culturally embodied performances were read as being either engaged or disruptive,  
appropriate or troublemaking.  
-Amanda Lewis, *Race in the Schoolyard*, p. 171

Jefferson students believed there were significant and insurmountable cultural differences between black and white people. As a result, they had very clear notions of what it meant to embody and perform one's racial identity. They believed black students

were energetic, rambunctious, and socially dominant, while white students were quiet, subdued and focused. However, the value placed upon these presumed differences varied by race. Black students generally saw themselves in a positive light. They described themselves as “hype,” “silly,” and “fun.” In comparison, they viewed white students as “lame” and “boring.” In contrast, white students viewed the behavior of their black peers as “loud,” “obnoxious,” and “annoying” and thought of themselves as “calm” and “mannerable.” Because their assessments differed so greatly, the ways in which students performed and made meaning of their racial identities often created a hostile climate that laid the foundation for the perpetuation of racial bias.

The commonly accepted notion of race as a social construction rather than a biological reality means that race is made real not because of differences in physical characteristics, behavior, language, or culture but by the ways in which these perceived differences are used to hierarchically categorize individuals (Omi & Winant, 1994). Numerous scholars of identity have talked about the ways in which racial identity is both “performed” by the racial actor, and “interpreted” by observers outside of that racial group. For example, O’Connor (2001) conceptualizes these differences as “reflection” and “refraction”—how individuals perform and experience their own identities versus how they “experience social identity as a consequence of how others...make sense of and, subsequently respond” to them (160). (Goffman, 1990) distinguishes between “expression” and “impression”—“the expression that [one] *gives*, and the expression that [one] *gives off*” (p. 2). These approaches suggest that identity is as much about how individuals identify as how they are identified by others.

In an effort to explain the connection between racial identity and inequality, anthropologists have argued that the notion of “culture” cannot be disconnected to ideas about race—particularly if one is interested in making sense of how racism works and is reproduced. As (Hartigan, 2005) argues:

We cannot effectively think through the process of racial identification and disidentification without a cultural perspective.... Without some understanding that our experience of the world is culturally contoured, it is difficult to regard racism as more than just an individual failing or a vaguely perceived “institutional” by-product. Without a recognition of the interlocking aspects of cultural perceptions and categorical identities, race appears as just another isolated subject of political correctness. But by starting with basic cultural

dynamics, it is easy to show how race both inflects and is shaped by judgments Americans make about whether or not certain people appear to be nice, or friendly, or hardworking—each reflecting a crucial categorical demarcation that ostensibly make no mention of race but that certainly operate at times in racial registers. A cultural perspective allows us to place race simultaneously in the mix of everyday life, shaping perceptions that ostensibly do not appear racial, but without reductively asserting that everything is about race. (p. 557)

In other words, it is often through the lens of “culture” that race is given social meaning. Without some sense that particular ways of embodying identity are “racial” and that these categories have some “value” attached to them, it would be very difficult to maintain a racial hierarchy. As will be seen in the next chapter, “cultural racism”—supposed bias against individuals because of their cultural performances, rather than their physical traits—is one of the contemporary ways in which racism is framed (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011).

This section explores the ways in which students make sense of race through the lens of cultural performance. In particular, it explores how black students view themselves and their white counterparts, and how white students view themselves and their black peers. Not surprisingly these assessments—exercises in identifying and identification—manifest in analyses that were at times contradictory and at others complimentary. I argue that although racialized groups of students made sense of racial performance differently, the perspectives of white students were those that ultimately held social weight. In other words, white students “articulations of culture” were those which operated “as social structure” (O’Connor, 2001, p. 160). Black students’ positive explanations of their behavior—the ways in which they viewed their cultural performances as “capital” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1984)—did not buy them much in the larger school structure. In fact, their cultural performances largely served to justify and reinforce white students’ (and teachers’) racial bias.

### **A. Hype v. Obnoxious**

When we out of school we always hyped and everybody be jumping around, [being] funny, clowning.  
-Dwayne, African American, 11<sup>th</sup> grade

We just born to talk, that’s what we all do.  
-Willie, African American, 11<sup>th</sup> grade

They just hype, you know, that's them.  
-Chris, 12<sup>th</sup> grade, African American

When asked to describe how those from different racial backgrounds dressed, behaved, spoke, and acted students at Jefferson always started by describing “black kids.” Although prevalent in popular discourse and academic scholarship, the term “acting white”<sup>43</sup> was for the most part unfamiliar to these students who had given much more thought to what it meant to embody blackness. Black students were thought to have a kind of swagger that made white students envious. In comparison, white students were considered lames and nobodies. As Brielle, a mixed race student, explained, “People rather be black than white. I know I would rather be black than white. I don’t know, I just think that black people have a certain beauty....I know a lot of white people that want to be black just cause it’s just, I guess, the hot thing, I don’t know.” “Black” was understood by students to be cooler and more culturally interesting. In contrast, black students, like Kaleem, often talked about not wanting to “[hang] out with them lame white people.” Marcus, agreed that black kids were cooler than white kids. When asked why, he responded, “cause we are. Like, we just are.” White students like Harrison, also believed that black students “tend to dictate what the popularity curve is.” As a result, “blackness” was the dominant social and cultural identity at Jefferson. Nonetheless, the ways in which black students performed their identities and the ways in which these identities were interpreted by their white peers, served to reinscribe notions of black inferiority.

Black students commonly used the adjective “hype” to describe their behavior in hallways, classrooms, and lunchrooms. “Hype” meant silly, light-hearted, and in

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<sup>43</sup> To date, much of the literature on racial identity performance in schools has focused on the ways in which notions of “acting white” mediate academic achievement for black students. These works have primarily focused on proving or debunking the notion that black underachievement is a response to the fear of being labeled culturally white (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998, Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, Fryer, 2006, Harris, 2006). More recently, cultural scholars have attempted to disentangle cultural performance and academic achievement (Bergin & Cooks, 2002, Carter, 2005, Horvat & O'Connor, 2006). In her book *Keepin' It Real: School Success Beyond Black and White*, Prudence Carter (2005) argues that “‘acting black,’ ‘acting Spanish, or ‘acting white’ connotes more about perceived ethno-racial cultural styles and tastes than about an opposition to education and a dejection about unachievable success and socioeconomic opportunities” (p. 9). The students at Jefferson High School supported Carter’s conclusion. They talked often of what it meant to “act” and “be” black or white but never used these terms to reference academic achievement, intelligence, or notions of future success. Rather, “acting white” and “acting black” signaled cultural performance and group belonging.

constant pursuit of amusement. According to Shantel who was black, black kids “just like to have fun. Like they just like to play around and joke with their friends and stuff.” Acting hype included things like, “rapping in the middle of class or in the hallways and...getting loud and like dancing,” according to Robyn, or “bouncing up and down,” according to Madison. Hype was something that black students performed communally. You could not be “hype” alone. Instead, being hype was about social interaction. As Brielle described, “I think black people feed off other black people. So like if one person’s hyped then they all get hyped.” Hype required that you collectively determine the standards of behavior and the mechanisms through which you would make school more interesting. As Felicia described, “[black students] make a party wherever we go.” She found this to be especially true when they were compared to white students, “We’re just [more alive], we just have more [life] in us.”

While black students thought of themselves using the positive term “hype,” white students read these same performances as “loud and obnoxious.”<sup>44</sup> Molly said while she sometimes found it “funny when [black kids] do stuff in the hallways, it gets, frustrating, when I’m in class and I feel they’re being really obnoxious.” Danny explained that this was a common sentiment among white students. “Sometimes white people find black people annoying,” he said. “The way they act and like the popular culture and all that. Just like the loud ghetto music walking down the hallways being really loud and kind of just like you’re the boss and stuff.” It was clear that a significant portion of white students found their black peers’ “loud,” “rowdy,” “disruptive” behavior to be a source of irritation and frustration. They saw “hopeness” as indicative of deeper deficiencies. According to Madison, “a lot of white people think that black people are just, they’re just ignorant and they’re just loud and crazy and stuff like that...” As a result, there was a palpable “us” versus “them” mentality among students from different racial backgrounds.

Black students were not blind to how their white peers viewed them. A number of black youth who themselves thought it was fun to be hype, worried that their mode of interaction led to problematic depictions of blackness. Fallon said, “Some of us, our black people, we overdo it too much by being loud and all that stuff. We need to calm that

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<sup>44</sup> These findings are very similar to those of Perry (2002) who notes that in integrated schools black students in lower tracks were often tagged “rowdy,” “lazy,” and “out of control” (p. 56).

down. We have other people looking at us different and stuff. Like for me when I see a loud person I [am] like, he just embarrassing our race, making us look bad.” In turn, hypeness was both a source of pride and distinction and a site of embarrassment and misbehavior for black students. They acknowledged that while “not a bad thing...” as Hampton, a black student, explained, these performances “helps the white people make stereotypes...” In turn, black students were constantly balancing their desire to be who they felt they innately were, with their awareness that who they were was inherently problematic in the eyes of their white peers who they thought of as “lame.”

Felicia gave an example of the dichotomy between lameness and hypeness: “A class meeting, have you been to one of those?” she asked. “You saw it for yourself! The whole middle row was black, and what were we doing? Talking the whole time! Everybody else was quite.” Because there were more white students at the school and they were not considered cool or hype, many black students felt that the school lacked energy and liveliness. According to Denise, “we always say our class is so lame cause like when we go to our meetings it’s mostly the white people who are the laid back ones. And so it’s like they don’t want to get hype with us. So it’s like, we’re so lame.” In turn, hype was perceived as the territory of black students alone—something that white people were either too scared, or too lame to take part in.

When white students described themselves, they talked less about being “lame” and more about being “regular,” “normal,” “mannerable” and “calm.” The irony was that while some black students were more visibly gregarious than white students, many white students engaged in “loud,” “rowdy,” “obnoxious” behavior as well. Moreover, many black students did not. When pressed, students were able to come up with examples in which white students performed in ways that were aligned with notions of “blackness.” Matt, a white student who openly criticized the behavior of his black peers, described his own idea of fun in ways that sounded very similar:

I’m white. Like what we consider as funny is like you know, um, overreacting, shouting. Or at least in my group, we overreact, we shout, we over-exaggerate things and we just bullshit each other...It’s kinda making fun of each other. It’s like poking fun and just like adding on top of it until it gets to a point where it’s completely ludicrous and sounds stupid.

However, Matt did not think about himself in disparaging terms. Unlike his black peers who he considered loud, obnoxious and ignorant, he saw himself, and his white peers, as just “poking fun.”

According to Dwayne, black students *seemed* louder than white students because they were more likely to have classes with their friends. He said, “if the white people was in a classroom with their friends they would do the same things we’re doing...Because when they not with us and they be in the lunchroom sometimes they used to play a little [hacky-sack], whatever that junk is. So like...if you in a classroom with a whole bunch of your friends you not going to do nothing but play around.” Although there were no official structures in place that would have made it more likely for black students to be in classes with their close friends, the propensity for black students at Jefferson to think of themselves as being a part of a larger black community supported Dwayne’s claim.

Brielle agreed:

The black people in school, I don’t know if you noticed, they have a lot of friends...and they hang out with everyone. So outside of school is like a big group of black people, they all just hang out and just chill, go to the movies and stuff. And then the white people like they don’t really have like tons of friends or the people I know that are white, they just hang out with a certain select few.

Because black students considered many more of their peers to be their friends in ways that white students did not, they were often in classes with people they were friends with. As a result, they had more opportunities to “get hype.” Nonetheless, while white and black students acknowledged, as Joseph put it, “a lot of different people just running around...not just black people,” notions of blackness and whiteness were so deeply engrained that students were not able to challenge their assumptions that blacks students alone were hype, and as a result, that they alone were culturally deficient.

## **B. Cafeteria Culture: Hype v. Lame**

If you go in the new cafeteria it’s so loud you can’t even talk to the person across from you. If you go to the old one you can have a nice calm conversation without yelling. So it’s like it’s the different environments they want to eat in. Like they don’t want to eat where a fight might break out or it’s just really loud and you can’t talk...Like some Caucasian people won’t want to eat in there because they want a quieter environment, and then black people are like, well the old cafeteria is boring and they don’t do anything in there so they just migrate to where all the other black people are I guess. To me it’s like, I feel like people have the right to choose what they want to do and what they want to be around so I feel like they just make the choice in the environment that they want to be in.

-Jada, African American, 12<sup>th</sup> grade

The notion of “hype” and “lame” as racialized categories was most apparent in the cafeterias. Students believed that there were significant cultural differences between Jefferson’s two cafeterias (see Chapter 4) that aligned with notions of blackness and whiteness. Students described the black cafeteria as a hype social space and the white cafeteria as boring. For example, Stella said, “When I first came here the first thing I was told during lunchtime was the new end is the hype cafeteria.” According to Farrah, “the new one is the black cafeteria. Like that’s like the cafeteria to be in. It’s always fun in there. And the old is like not. The gothics, and like the white kids, and the preppies and all that go to the old one.” She went on to say that the cafeteria where the black students congregated was “big” and “bright” and the white cafeteria was “dull and sad-looking.” Marcus agreed that when it came to cafeterias, “basically all the lame people go to the old lunch and all of the cool people go to the new lunch.” For him, the lame people were the “typical punk rock, band geeks.” Similarly, Pamela referred to the old cafeteria as “like the weird one where all the rejects go.”

In all of these cases, students were categorizing the black cafeteria as a place of fun and coolness, and the white cafeteria as one in which lameness was manifest. Interestingly, they associated *any* presentations of whiteness with lameness. Louis, a mixed race student, agreed with this assessment of the ways in which race and coolness mapped onto each other in the cafeterias. He said, “I guess all the like really popular kids and stuff eat in that new side and then all the kids who aren’t so popular eat in the old.” When asked if this meant the black students were more popular, Louis said that they were.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the black cafeteria not only had a reputation for being more fun, it was also perceived as more dangerous. Kiara struggled to explain:

How do I want to say this? Maybe the white kids don’t want to be in all that, so they go to the old cafeteria and then there’s more white people down there. Cause they get kind of rowdy in the new cafeteria too, like it irritates me cause I do homework sometimes at lunch, and then you know there’s always the quote unquote “almost fight” and there’s always something stupid happening down there.

Unfortunately, because there were such strong norms of who belonged where and what the culture of each cafeteria was, students who challenged racial norms, like Kiara, were not easily able to find a space that suited them.

In my observation, the black cafeteria was not particularly louder than the white one. Rather, the stereotypes that had developed about what it meant to be black or white, fueled most of the differences students claimed to observe. Interestingly, only one student attributed the differences in cafeteria noise level to actual structural differences. Winnie was a biracial student who had a multi-racial friend group and ate in both cafeterias. Unlike other students who simply believed that black students were louder, she said it was loud in the east because, “It’s a bigger room. I mean it’s a multipurpose room and it’s a...cafetorium. The acoustics in that room are meant for, like to, [have] performances in there.” For her, the difference in noise level had little to do with cultural differences among students. Rather it resulted from the different ways in which the cafeterias had been built. Nonetheless, the racial make-up of the two spaces created a narrative in which students in the new cafeteria were perceived to need more regulation by students, as well as administrators and support staff who were more likely to patrol the black cafeteria.

### **C. Ghetto, Gangster, Wannabe**

I hear people like, we had a senior meeting yesterday after school and like, I don’t want to say it’s like it’s pretty much the Brittany group (a popular white female who was interviewed for Chapter 4 and 5 and her friends)...class president, it’s the Brittany group....And they’re like... it was an open meeting and I hear Katie and Brittany and Riley (also interviewed in earlier sections) talking, they’re like, “We shouldn’t have made this meeting open like it’s so ghetto in here right now and everybody just won’t shut up, we should have just kept this to ourselves.” I’m like, “What are you talking about, we’re a class, we need to do things together,” and I was really mad she said it was ghetto....Because she was like, there were two sides of the room, like it was super divided, was the Brittany group and...there were like a lot of African American students that weren’t really involved in school things, they were trying to get their points across and like she is sitting on the left side of the room and she pointed her hand towards the right side where all the black students were. She’s like, “It’s so ghetto in here,” and I’m like did that girl just, I caught myself, I caught myself, I didn’t start nothing...I silenced myself...cause I knew if I said something now.  
-Jasmine, African American

While disagreeing about whether or not the behavior of black students was admirable or annoying, young people from all racial backgrounds classified African American students as “ghetto,” “gangsters” and “wannabes.” Logan, a white student, described what it meant to be “ghetto” in the following way, “Just saggy pants and talking with a slang and acting loud and obnoxious.” According Jasmine, a black student,

“ghetto” was “a common word that gets associated with loud and black. Like loud and black usually equals ghetto. Ghet-toe,” she sounded out. Ghetto was connected to how you spoke, what you talked about, what you ate, how you acted, the music you listened to, what you wore and how you wore it, and the things you liked to do in your spare time. Jasmine said ghetto people did things like:

Talk about eating fried chicken all the time, just like things usually associated with loud, ghetto black people. Like just talking about ghetto things like, “oooh, I got to go home and take my tracks out girl,” like stuff...that you don’t share. Like walk around with big ol’ bags of chips and two liters, coming to school with a head scarf on, and pajamas, knowing you’re about to get sent home for it and just be like, “yaw! just doing this because I’m black!”

Ghetto was simultaneously affiliated with being overly materialistic and being so unconcerned with social conventions that you were willing to come to school in pajamas. Ghetto students were willing to share what Michael Herzfeld calls “cultural intimacies”—those facets of identity that at once informed in-group solidarity, and caused embarrassment when viewed by those beyond the group—with “outside observer[s] whose disapproval matters, whose judgments can be predicted, and (most important of all) whose opinion is vital in determining what value ‘common sociality’ can have” (Shryock, 2004p. 10).

In sum, ghetto meant failing to behave in ways that were aligned with white, middle-class norms. In turn, ghetto was inherently a class marker. And yet, ghetto was not a classification reserved for a select group of impoverished black youth. Rather, a number of white students admitted to viewing black students collectively as ghetto. Brittany, a white student from an all white community, said when she first got to Jefferson, “I kind of judged [the black students]. I kind of thought they were ghetto. Like in the hallways they like be singing or something and then I see like everyone wearing that sag in their pants and wearing like those, I don’t know even know what they’re called. And I’m like, ‘oh my word.’ Like I never like saw it before, you know.” Riley, a white female student who had been in the district her entire life said that this was a common reaction of white students to black students, “[White] people say like, ‘oh, that person is black, they’re not good, they’re a ghetto.’ That’s what I hear.” In turn, “ghetto” was an identity that white students were attaching broadly to performances of blackness.

According to Anderson (1983), “communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (p. 6). At Jefferson this meant that black youth writ large were imagined as and imagined themselves to be hardcore and gangster.

The differences in black and white style facilitated notions of what did and did not qualify as “ghetto.” At Jefferson style and race were closely linked—particularly when it came to the name brands of clothing. Black students wore South Pole, Baby Phat, and Rocawear and boys sagged their pants. In contrast, white students generally wore t-shirts and jeans from Abercrombie & Fitch, Aeropostal, or Hollister. These different styles were attached to notions of class. White students often described their black peers as looking poor, by which they meant “dressing black.” As Harrison, a white student, said, “They’re not poor, but they dress and act like it. Why? I don’t understand it.” He was aware that most of his black peers mainly came from economically stable homes. However, he read their performances of identity, which did not align with his middle-class white norms, as reflective of a lower-class position.

Ironically, in order to read as “ghetto” or “hype” at Jefferson you could not actually look poor. Instead, you had to have enough disposable income to wear the latest, name-brand, urban trends. Black students’ attire was by no means cheap. Black students who were unable to buy these clothes were not thought of as hype, cool, or ghetto, instead, they were considered lame—like white students. Brielle described the lame black kids as, “just like the people that, like it’s like bad to say, but the people that I guess don’t dress well or stink or like their hair is a mess or something and just the ones that don’t really put their self out there and show their real personalities, they just sit there all quiet in class.” Brielle’s analysis of what it meant to be lame hit on both ideologies of racial performance as well as notions of class status. Lame black people were those students who did not have the resources to look “ghetto,” or the personality to act “hype.”

The inability of white students to separate “urban/black” style from “poor looking” was particularly notable because it suggested that by nature of being black, students were presumed to be poor as well (Feagin & Sikes, 1994). Despite the fact that so many of the white students were poor, and so many of the black students were not, “middle-class status” status was reserved for white people (Rubin, 1976). In large part

this was because, as Sherry Ortner (1998) finds, “there is no class in America that is not always already racialized and ethnicized, or to turn the point around, racial and ethnic categories are always already class categories” (p. 10). Many of the black students lived in newly constructed subdivisions, and had nice clothes, cars, electronics and parents who were employed in jobs that afforded them a “middle-class” lifestyle, and yet because they were black, white students attached notions of a lower class position to their style and identity performances.

A number of black students, especially boys, were not only considered “ghetto,” they were also thought of “wannabe gangsters.”<sup>45</sup> According to Kaleem, being gangster at Jefferson was exhibited by “going around, you just [like], ‘man, I’m the hardest nigger here. All ya’ll Jefferson niggers are B,’ things like that.” “Gangster” not only denoted a lower-class black cultural identity, but also a willingness to perform this identity in ways that were domineering assertions of power.

Many “gangster” students claimed to actually be gang members. Who exactly was in the gangs and what they did was never quite clear. Some white students talked about being cautious of black students because they were gang members. However, most students did not take gangs very seriously. Dwayne explained, “I mean some people will be saying they Bloods, Crips, and all that junk. To me, I think it’s fake cause I don’t see nobody doing nothing. People walk down this hallway with a blue flag and a red flag and they might be friends.”

In addition to the friendships across “gangs,” black students cited the lack of gang violence as evidence that they were not to be feared. Kaleem, compared the gang members at Jefferson to those from his previous high school in another state. He said that at Jefferson it was hard for him to take gangs seriously because, “most of them don’t have guns, you know.” His assessment of the gang phenomenon was that at Jefferson there were simply, “a lot of fake people. Especially the black kids. Like some of them

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<sup>45</sup> Perry’s (2002) study similarly found that black students in integrated schools are often labeled “gangsters” from the “hood” (p. 60). In addition, Pascoe’s (2007) student of masculinity and homophobia notes that boys from many backgrounds face social pressures to assert their masculine identities in ways connected to notions of “hardness” and “coolness. She notes that there is especially pressure on black male youth to read not only as “masculine” but also as “gangster.” Unfortunately, the performances of masculinity enacted by black male students were “more likely to be punished by school authorities” (p. 5).

like to act tough and stuff like that. They act fake, just to get along and stuff.” It was the class position of black students that made their “gang” activity most questionable. Gwen, a white female student who was cautious about dating black boys because of their gang affiliations, said “they talk like the Blood and the Crips and they have these hand signs and it’s like you’re not even part of them! They’re probably middle class, [and] are living in, you know, nice houses.” Alan agreed that many of the students who talked about “how to be more gangster,” were “usually middle-class to upper-middle-class.” This dichotomy between what students understood “real” gangs to be, and the socioeconomic and geographic backgrounds of the majority of black students, was contradictory. They were not quite sure it was possible to live in subdivisions in the rural exurbs and be gangsters. Ed, a white student who had a history of trouble-making described this contradiction:

There’s just a lot of people who think they’re gangsters and stuff, like a lot of wannabes. They play the part of a gang and stuff and, they get out in the streets and they start acting like that and they meet a real gangster and then they’re just nothing, and they get scared. A lot of people claim they are [in gangs, but] like who’s gonna let a 16 year old kid in a gang? I mean, it happens but I just think that we’re out in the sticks pretty much.

Laughing he said they are “stick gangs.”

The critique of these white students illuminated a dual narrative of black racial performance. On one hand, white students believed their black peers to be from lower-income backgrounds and argued that as a result they were inherently more dangerous, threatening, and gangster. On the other hand, they argued that black students who performed in this way were faking it—that they were “wannabes.” White students repeatedly complained by what they considered contradictory performances of identity in which middle-class black students were putting on “hood” personas to validate their blackness.

According to Logan, “I think once [middle-class black kids] come here they just turn into this ghetto wannabe thug at this school.” He gave an example of Trevor, a black male student who came from a two-parent home in which his mother was working on her Ph.D. “Like Trevor,” he continued, “Trevor’s got money. I know he does. I’ve been in his house. It’s nice with white carpet, glass. When his mom comes in the school, cause

she does sometimes, he just sits there and does his work, he's not his normal self, [which is] just like a normal black kid here, just ghetto, wannabe ghetto." On one hand, Logan felt that many students at the school were pretending to be ghetto when they were, in fact, middle-class. However, he was also frustrated that Trevor did not act like "his normal self," when his mother was around. In other words, Logan believed that the "ghetto" version of Trevor, rather than how he behaved when his mother was around, was his authentic self. Logan did not allow space for Trevor to hold a double-consciousness (Gilroy, 1993) or code-switch (Gumperz, 1977; Hill, 1998; Morgan, 2002) in navigating the borders of home and school (Carter, 2005).

Curtis, also white, was particularly annoyed by what he perceived to be inauthentic performances of identity on behalf of his black peers. He said that many black students:

[Try] to act hard and ghetto when they live next to a farm. I mean come on now, you live right by...corn, you have a cornfield. Look out your window there's a cornfield right there...you're not ghetto dude, so don't act like it. I mean they're being stupid. And I hate people that act like that. That aggravates me. I don't know. Trying to act like you're someone you're not. Like they're from the hood or something. Like they live in complete poverty when they don't.

Curtis' comments revealed the tension and conflict that differential interpretations of racial performances created across race. He was not causally commenting upon black students' presentations of self. Rather, he was aggravated and angered by this duality.

Ironically, at the same time as white student complained that black students were acting fake, many white students held onto the belief that the majority of black people in the district had, in fact, come from "the hood." Many students at Jefferson believed black students behaved differently than white students because they had only recently moved into the area from poorer and more urban communities and had learned how to interact in those contexts. In contrast, they repeatedly said that white students were primarily from Jefferson—a rural, boring place in which acting hype, or being ghetto was not the cultural norm. Black students also repeated this narrative rather frequently. Willie, a black student who lived in an apartment, agreed that most of the "ghetto" behavior was the result of the fact that, "black kids moved over here from like [majority black, lower-income communities]." In contrast, he thought that, "...like nothing really goes on out here you

know. All the white people have been out here since kindergarten and so they're used to being quiet, not doing anything really."

While this analysis was partially true, it glossed over the ways in which popular culture and social stratification have worked together to signal to black youth that in order to be black and masculine, one also has to be hard and gangster, regardless of class position (A. A. Ferguson, 2000; Perry, 2002). As actors in a particular social and political context, black students were expressing themselves, perhaps unconsciously, in "the tradition [their] group or social status requires" (Goffman, 1990, p. 6). Scholars have long noted the ways in which black youth, particularly males, sometimes adopt a "cool pose" (Majors & Billson, 1992) to cope with how they are criminalized and marked as "inferior, deviant, or dysfunctional" by the mainstream (Dance 2003, p. 18). Dance (2002) distinguishes the various performances of "street-savvy students who appropriate gangster like postures," noting differences between those youth who are actually "hardcore" and those who are "hardcore wanna-be" or "hardcore enough" (52).

Most students at Jefferson were "hardcore wanna-bes" rather than actually hardcore. However arguably the "gangster posture" was the norm in mainstream black and popular culture. In many ways, the racial performances of black youth were emulations of media depictions of blackness. Unlike many adults around them who understood the ways in which media depictions of the black experience failed to capture the diverse ways in which black people in the United States construct their identity, many of the young people attending high school at Jefferson bought into the notion that in order to be "authentically black," they had to look, act, dress, speak and behave like the black people they saw on TV—athletes, rappers, entertainers, and criminals (hooks, 1994; Kitwana, 2002; Rose, 1994; Watkins, 1998). This meant that black students thought of themselves not only as innately more talented when it came to athletics, music and dancing, but also innately tougher, more ghetto, more gangster.

Hebdige (1979) argues that this is the way that subculture works. Youth "...are simultaneously *returned*, as they are represented on TV and in newspapers, to the places where common sense would have them fit...It is through this continual process of recuperation that the fractured order is repaired and the subculture is incorporated as a divergent spectacle within the dominant mythology from which it in part emanates: as

‘folk devil,’ as Other, as Enemy” (p. 94). Media did not only serve to reinforce dominate myths about black students as “other” and “enemy”—“ghetto” and “(wannabe) gangster”—it also reflected this image back to black youth. As Hebdige (1979) writes, “...the media not only provide groups with substantive images of other groups, they also relay back to...[marginalized]...people a ‘picture’ of their own lives which is ‘contained’ or ‘framed’ by the ideological discourses which surround and situate it...[the media] has colonized the cultural and ideological sphere” (p. 85). The slippage in how black students’ performances were framed made racial relations at Jefferson rather complicated. Young people at once thought of black students as poor and middle class, wannabe and gangster, outsiders and insiders. As a result, despite the awareness that black students were not the “ghetto gangsters” that white students envisioned them to be (and that they often envisioned themselves to be), the notion that gangster-ness, ghetto-ness, and poverty equated “blackness” was reproduced and reinforced.

### **III. NOT BECAUSE THEY’RE BLACK, BECAUSE THEY’RE LOUD: EXCUSING RACISM**

Because black students were perceived as “ghetto,” “gangster,” “loud,” and “obnoxious,” a significant number of white students felt that it was acceptable to be racist toward them. They justified their discrimination using the frame of “cultural racism,” by attaching it to particular behaviors and expressions rather than race (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). They excused their racism by claiming that it was not black *people* they disliked, rather it was their ways of speaking, dressing, acting and looking that were problematic. Brittany, a student who admittedly stereotyped her black peers as “ghetto,” explained racial bias among students:

One of my friend’s brother is really racist and he like wouldn’t even...talk to no black people, nothing. Wouldn’t talk to them, wouldn’t associate with them to say like mean stuff about them...He said he’s not racist, but he just don’t like the ghetto black people. And if the black people are wearing the nice clothes too then they’re okay....[I]f there was like a loud black kid and he wore Hollister clothes I’m pretty sure no one will be racist against him. But if he started...sagging his pants and wearing those do rags and putting in a gold tooth, you know what I’m saying, then they’d probably be racist.

As her commented indicated, dressing black inherently meant that one did not look “nice.” It was this connection between race and style that triggered her racist white peers.

Brittany captured the sentiment of many white students at the school. While they thought it was wrong to judge someone by the color of their skin, they ultimately felt justified in discriminating against black people who were too culturally black.

Interestingly, her attempt to explain these cultural deficiencies, she greatly overstated the ways in which black students in Jefferson presented themselves. In two years, I never observed a black student with a gold tooth or wearing a doo-rag. And yet, these very stereotypical depictions of urban blackness were what Brittany relied upon when describing students at her own school. Her explanation illuminated the struggle of black students to be seen by white students as anything other than “ghetto.”

Matt gave a similar example of the tensions between black and white students. He explained:

A lot of times I've heard like, “I hate black people.” But like I understand. They don't hate them because they're black, they hate them because they're loud. It's not because they're black most of the time. Cause I'm pretty sure there's some hardcore racist people here. But from what I've heard or from what I've interpreted it's just, they just hate them because they're loud and they're annoying.

Matt felt that it was not “black” as a racial identity that was the site of anger for white students, but rather black as a cultural performance that they struggled with. Matt gave a specific example of his friend who struggled with her dislike for black people:

Like, my friend...you would never have guessed, like but she comes from a very southern background. She's very family oriented and she's a really responsible girl and she's been through some tough stuff. But like she really has a, I told her, “you really hate black people. Like you really hate the color of their skin.” And she said something like, “I'm Southern.” And it seemed like...she was saying yes, but like that's not like a reason to hate black people. But I'm pretty sure she doesn't like fully hate them cause like she has talked with like black girls before and she's been fine with them. So I'm pretty sure it's just to a certain extent or when she gets mad or a certain type of black person.

In this scenario, this young lady's southern background, family orientation, and responsibility were used to justify her racism. While Matt acknowledged that she did in fact dislike black people because of the color of their skin, he ultimately concluded that she must not dislike them all that much because on occasion she had talked to a black

person. Interestingly, he made the decision that she was not racist for her because in his eyes skin color was not a good reason to be racist, despite the fact that he also said she had all but admitted that she was racist for precisely this reason. In turn, at Jefferson, if you were an otherwise “nice” or “good” person, who only disliked certain kinds of black people, it was acceptable to be openly racist.

In some instances, white students who themselves read as rather “ghetto” gave similar explanations for why their families were justified in discriminating against black people. Ethan, a white student, talked about the discrimination his own parents felt when engaging with his black friends. He said for them:

It’s more of how you carry yourself. Like...if some person walk in our house my parents would look at how they dress or how they act, how they talk like, “yes sir, no sir,” that type of stuff. Or when they come in, [do] they clean up after themselves or just make a mess and leave? I mean they don’t really look too much toward race....[But] if I brought, a friend home and...you can tell he was from the City they might have a problem with that. But if I brought a black friend over who carried himself a certain way they wouldn’t care as much. Like I said I don’t want to say certain things, but like kids from the City are more likely to say certain things than people who grew up out here.... I’d say more likely to being disrespectful.

Ethan felt that his parents were judging his friends based on behavior rather than race. However, he admitted that if a black person entered his home they had to prove to his family that they were exceptional, especially if they performed their racial identities in ways that led his parents to assume they might be from the City. This exceptionalism included referring to his father as “sir”—the kind of greeting that historical memory reminds us white men expected of black men in an era of racism and segregation. Because the narrative of blackness that permeated the school more broadly was one in which most black students were considered “ghetto,” potentially any black student that Ethan brought home would have to prove themselves in this way.

Ironically, Ethan was a student who, though very bright, was thought by many teachers and students to be a thug. His close friends, who included Blake from the fight that opened this dissertation, got in trouble often. He slept in class regularly and put little effort into his work. He wore baggy clothes which included a big white t-shirt, an-oversized zipper hoodie, and saggy jeans. He looked like a white student who “acted black,” came from a lower-class home, and was in a “gang.” In turn, his parents expected

the black friends he brought home to present in ways their own son did not, and arguably did not have to.

White students who used black cultural norms to justify racism failed to acknowledge that by hating attributes they primarily associated with blackness, they were, in fact, making a statement about what they thought about black people as a group. Black students could not escape accusations that they were poor, ghetto, loud, obnoxious, ignorant, and inauthentic, unless they erased all traces of their “blackness,” both culturally and materially. Because most black students were unable and unwilling to do this (Carter, 2005), white students felt justified in holding racial biases.

Interestingly, many black students also took part in justifying the racism of their white peers. They also believed that black people as whole were “bad” and culturally deficient and thus inherently deserving of the negative sentiments directed at them. For example, Fallon, a black student, described black people in the following way:

They are bad. Well I think everybody knows black people are bad. Like, oh you going to the City? Yeah, I’m going over there by the hood or something like that. Oh you going to get shot up and all that. Always selling weed, stealing stuff, shooting, killing people....It’s making the black, it’s making the African American people look bad these days. Like on the news you see like a black person they killed a white person. Now you see, I bet you they whole [white] family probably racist now.

Fallon felt that because black people were “bad,” it made sense that white students and families would be racist. After all, it is easy to be racist when a group of people is believed to be innately dangerous. More specifically, Fallon saw the ways in which the badness of black people manifest during the school day. She said black students at Jefferson, “are loud, they’re bad and they always getting in trouble....I don’t know why. It seems like the white people is like calm....Like half of the people in this school that are getting suspended and you know...ISS and getting written up, and stealing is mostly black people.” Willie agreed that black students caused more trouble in the school. He said, “if you think about it, it’s mainly the black kids who’s doing something wrong.” Fallon and Willie’s observations were based on the reality that black students made up a

disproportionate percentage of punished offenders.<sup>46</sup> However, what they were unable to disentangle was whether or not this disproportionate punishment was the result of black students' poor behavior, or the subconscious biases of the larger school system, including their white peers, that served to punish black students more harshly for behaviors displayed by students from all racial groups.

### **A. White (Middle-Class) Kids are Bad Too?**

When pushed, students revealed that their white peers were “bad” too. According to Chelsea, a black student, in the cafeteria white students “be standing on top of tables screaming. They listen to music, they go crazy off listening to rock music or whatever it’s called and like shake their heads and just act crazy in the halls and stuff.” Kaleem said that in classrooms, white students were often the ones who behaved poorly. “In our class we have a lot of Caucasian kids,” he said. “They just like are nuts, you know. They drive the teacher nuts and I try to tell them to listen and then sometimes I be getting along with them and we be ganging up on the teacher and stuff like that. They don’t listen, they always talking, their iPod on and they be making stupid noises.... They’re always late to class and they don’t really care.” While Kaleem admitted that he occasionally joined his white peers in “driving the teacher nuts” he felt that in general, that white students were responsible for the majority of classroom disruption.

Winnie, believed that black students had been unfairly stereotyped. In her own observations, “badness” could not be attached to a racial group at the school, rather, individuals from all racial backgrounds made poor decisions regarding how to behave:

See it really depends on the people because lots of times I find that the white kids are just as bad. I think it really depends ...you can say some black kids are rambunctious, but you can say some white kids are and we have some trashy white kids at our school. Like I don’t like to use the word like ‘ho’ or anything but I’d say like trashy girls or you know trashy boys. We have some trashy people at our school who are just as disrespectful, trashy white people who are... just as disrespectful as any black person. So I don’t think it’s really fair to say it’s only black kids who are out of control in class.

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<sup>46</sup> According to a 2009 report by the American Civil Liberties Union, black students at Jefferson were more likely to be given suspensions and expulsions.

Interestingly, in this analysis while Winnie was able to acknowledge that white students were also “bad,” it was the lower-class white students who read as “trashy” that fit this profile. White students who read as middle-class or upper-middle class were still off the hook.

When asked to reflect on the racial dynamics at the school, a number of students said that the only real difference in how students from different racial backgrounds behaved was that when white students were bad, they got away with it.<sup>47</sup> Brandy gave the following example, “[In one teacher’s class] I don’t act up, but I know it’s a few Caucasian kids that act up such as Marissa. She’s cusses, she’s always talking loud, disrupting the class. In [another] class, these two white boys they’re always just talking, disrupting, disrespect her” but she found that in general these students did not get in trouble for their behavior. This seemed to be especially true for white students who read as middle and upper-middle class.

Logan, a well-off, average achieving student, was a good example of the ways in which class position and whiteness mediated notions of badness. I was motivated to talk to him because I often saw him walking the hallway during class time. I regularly asked him why he was not in class and he always had a witty comeback and flashed a big smile. One day, he confessed to me, “I get to do whatever I want in this school.” He explained:

I have this school wrapped around my finger. I feel like I can do anything here. ...Because just having so many friends and just getting older. You be friends with a lot of students you get introduced to different teachers. [I can] leave school when I want. Skip when I want. Walk around the school when I want. I mean when I’m hungry I [leave] or when I want to go home I go. I [can] walk in from Wendy’s or something.

Although Jefferson was a closed campus, Logan said that he came and went as he pleased during the school day. Moreover, he claimed that teachers and administrators were aware of his behavior. When asked how these adults responded he said they did not say anything to him or interrupt his behavior in any way. In fact, he claimed that some adults

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<sup>47</sup> Morris’ (2006) study of white students in a majority black school similarly found that race mediated discipline in ways that systematically disadvantaged students of color. He writes, “race and gender in this case triggered some educators to interpret white boys as docile and appropriate and black and Latino boys as irascible and aggressive even when both exhibited similar behavior and dress.” He found that for teachers of all racial backgrounds, “black and Latino boys received the strictest and more persistent discipline” (p. 81).

in the building facilitated his freedom by giving him money to buy them lunch, texting with him during the school day, covering for him when he skipped other classes, and even giving him the security codes to the school building.

While Logan did not think he had racial privilege in the school, he believed his class position facilitated his freedom. When asked if he would be able to do these things if he had different social identities he said, “I don't know. I really don't know. I mean if I was still the same person but was black I would think so.” He continued:

I don't think so if I was poor. Just like different way of dressing and how they respond to how you look and stuff...It depends on who you are and how you get treated...I've seen [teachers] taking a lot of kids down to the office...and they're like saying I didn't do this...but I mean who knows what they were doing, but it's...always a lot of poor kids I see going down to the office. They're watched more is what I think it is.

Molly, a white female student agreed that having a higher-class position came with certain privileges in the school. She told the following story:

There's this girl on our soccer team and she has a lot of money because her parents have their own business and she thinks she can walk all over people and she even says like, oh my parents will do this and do that. Like she'll get herself into a bunch of trouble because she knows she can get out of it. Last year we had senior night...and she doesn't like our soccer coach, nobody does, but you can't disrespect an adult or your coach like that, you know. And she like starts cussing at my coach and saying all this crap about how the soccer program is the shit because of her and I mean...the whole stance, her everything, she was...horrible. Like it embarrassed our soccer program really bad and her parents went up to the athletic director and started yelling at him about, like trying to make everything flip on my coach and the athletic director told my coach that she had to play that girl the next day or she wouldn't be coaching anymore...Her parents do that stuff all the time, like get her out of trouble like that just by talking.

While neither of these students connected class privileges to race, as previous sections indicated, black students were read as poor and ghetto. In turn, if middle- and upper-middle class status provided students with the freedom to break rules without consequence, black students were inherently more likely to be targeted for disciplinary infractions.

#### **IV. WE RUN THIS: BLACK RACIAL DOMINANCE**

The ways in which students embodied and performed their racial identities did not merely serve to segregate students socially or give them license to justify clandestine racial bias. Instead, these markers of cultural difference were connected to social dominance, intimidation, and power (Foucault, 1995). White students ultimately believed that black students “ran” the school, both culturally and numerically. Black students were seen as threatening, domineering, and aggressive. As a result, many inaccurately thought black students made up the majority of the student population. The perceived dominance of black students created a hostile climate in which the hallways were a battleground. Black students used their physicality to purposefully intimidate white students for their own amusement. In response, white students formatted themselves as victims rather than participants in a joking exchange. While white students reconciled their own verbal bullying as post-racial, when black students decided to, as Kaleem put it, “[make] fun of white people” in ways that towed the line between the antagonistic and the humorous, it was seen as problematic.

##### **A. The Racial Majority**

Because “blackness” was the center of cultural expression, many students assumed the black population was larger than it actually was. For example, Harrison, a white student, said “in this school I feel like there is a lot more black kids than there are other students. I feel like they’re the majority of the school.” Brittany estimated that 70% of the students at Jefferson were black. When she realized she had overestimated by 35% she said, “I thought there was more African American than there were white. Maybe because I don’t really see everyone. When I first came here I was like, ‘oh my word, there’s so many [more] black people than white people here.’ Like I wasn’t used to it you know.”

Studies have found that white people often over-estimate the numbers black people in the country and in social and institutional settings. Unlike people of color, white people are accustomed to living in a world in which they see themselves represented frequently in media, in positions of power, in the workplace, as teachers in schools, and as neighbors and community members. Because most white people live

fairly segregated lives, when they are in integrated spaces, racial difference becomes hyper-visible. As Gallagher (2003) writes, “the lack of contact between racial groups and the perceived hypervisibility of blacks by whites is thought to be one factor that breeds ignorance, hostility, and discrimination toward racial minorities” (p. 383). White people tend to perceive black people as dangerous, menacing, and threatening to their social status and cultural norms. Students at Jefferson were not immune to these trends. Rather, many admitted to struggling to handle being in what felt to them like predominantly black spaces.

Some white students felt uneasy with the numbers of black students in their classes. Hailey, was a white female student who was considered “gothic,” because of her penchant for black clothing said:

In most of my classes I feel weird because like there would only be one or two white people in my classes. Like my government class, there are like three white people. There are more people like African American descent. I figured it out when we decorated the school and there weren't that many that showed up that weren't like, like African American or [white] preppy so I felt really weird.

Hailey's comments highlighted both the ways in which black students were perceived as having more social power within the school, and the stark binary of black and white that existed. She was not only uncomfortable because she was often in classes in which she perceived black students to be the majority, she also felt out of place because the white students who were prominent in the school seemed to be a certain “type.”

The categorization of white students into clicks, types, and subgroups was another example of embodied racial privilege. White students could be preppies, gothics, weird kids, smart kids, band geeks, or jocks, among other things. In contrast, black students at the school were, according to Farrah, “just the black kids. They don't call us anything.” “Blackness” trumped all other social (e.g. class) and personal identities. In the broader school discourse, if you were black, that was all you were—you were not also allowed to have membership in specialized sub-cultures. While this reality created a sense of community among black students in ways that white students did not feel, it also meant that black students were reduced to their racialized selves, making it easier for tensions around race to manifest.

## **B. Obama-mania**

The 2008 presidential election was illustrative of racial tensions, black social dominance, and white resentment. Just months before the fieldwork for this project began, Barack Obama was elected President of the United States. At Jefferson High School, not unlike many schools in the country, the campaign and win of Obama brought racial tensions to a head. Although Jefferson students were generally disengaged from politics, they were very much aware of the racialized discourse of the presidential campaign. In particular, the win of Obama was a source of significant pride for black students, who bragged about having a black president, and a source of frustration for white students who viewed black students' expressions of pride as domineering, intimidating, cocky, and even racist.

Recalling that time, Robyn said:

Like the Obama thing, oh my God. I had Government. Okay, we had a primarily white classroom. And then we had like two tables and like all the African American students sat there. And we had like all the white people around. It was weird. But I know once Obama was picked it was like African Americans felt like they were stronger than the white people. Like, "Ya'll just jealous 'cause we won," this and that. Like you don't have to act like that. It was just like okay, we've had enough of it. He's President. Get over it.

Bethany had a similar experience:

I just know last year I was really annoyed. Like, yeah Obama is a good president but like last year they over did it. They were shouting in the halls, pushing people. I just remember being really mad that entire day. It was ridiculous. So many people were screaming ignorant things. They were screaming like "Black power," "We rule this," and just like things that were unneeded. When a white president gets elected we aren't like, "We rule this. White power." It was just annoying. I was just like he's president, you're not. Drop it. Let's see what he does.

African American students also agreed that the election caused tension. However, they argued that the hostile comments were not coming from black students, they were coming from white students who were struggling to accept a black president. According to Jada:

After the whole election it kind of seemed divided because you really saw people's views on what they wanted. And you could tell that some people's families were like really all for you know John McCain and they're like, we're just strict believers and we just got to have a white president and the black president came in office. And so like maybe a week after, that whole week after the election, after Barack Obama became President, it seemed kind of

divided....[White] people would make comments like, “We got this black dude in office, he not gonna do nothing,” “We just had to have a black president,” “You know all the black people voted for him.” And this became this big deal. So it just kind of divided us like, divided the school.

Although students talked about the election of President Obama as an event that “divided the school,” in reality, the school was already divided. Students held very different understandings of what kinds of performances and expressions were appropriate, obnoxious, good, and bad. The tensions that already existed between black and white students turned a moment that should have been unifying into an opportunity for black students to assert their cultural power and for white students to further cultivate their resentment. The controversy raised by the election was not (only) about politics, it was about race, and the reality the only way to exhibit or interpret black pride was through the lens of racial discord.

### **C. The Bully of White Kids: Everyday Racial Intimidation in Hallways**

Racial tensions were not relegated to lunchrooms and political events. Instead, daily cross-racial interactions in hallways and classrooms were opportunities for hostilities to flare up. One of the biggest complaints that white students had about black students was that they bumped into people in the hallway and congregated in such large social groups that they blocked the flow of traffic.

Some black students admitted to engaging in this behavior purposefully to show their racial dominance. As Dwayne explained:

Black people known as the bully of white people. Because we stronger than them. Like we’ll push them around sometimes. Like if a white person was in our way we’d probably push them. It depends on who you with though. Cause if I was to like walk in and there was a whole bunch of white people and I’m not with my friends and I pushed that white person they probably going to do something to me.

When asked why he pushed white students, Dwayne responded, “Cause they in my way and they littler than me.” He continued, “But I mean sometimes people be playing around though. Like they’ll push somebody just to be playing around. Cause like people will laugh at stuff like that.” According to Dwayne, black students engaged in this behavior for two reasons. The first was simply to assert their authority in the space. To

make sure that white students knew who was “in charge.” Ironically, although, Dwayne definitely had a “hard” edge, he was not a large young man at all. In fact, he was one of the smaller male students in his grade. In turn, his assertion that he should push white students around because they were “littler,” was a figment of his imagination, facilitated by the stereotypes of black people that permeated the school and the larger popular culture.

The second reason that some black students bumped into white students was because it was humorous. If being “hype” was primarily focused on having fun, pushing white students around created just the sort of entertainment that some black students sought. Like the racial jokes inflicted by white students, some black students found amusement in openly harassing white peers. However, unlike black students, who had collectively convinced themselves that it was amusing when white people made fun of them, white students did not find it so amusing when black people were pushing them and calling it a joke.

White students were not only frustrated by the purposeful ways in which some black students pushed them around, they were also annoyed by the ways in which large groups of black students hindered their ability to get where they were going. There were a few hallway junctures in particular that got especially crowded during the day. As Leah described, “like a lot of the black kids tend to just like congregate in masses like around this one spot and it’s like hard to get through to get to class.” When asked to describe what black students did in the hallways that he found so annoying, Logan said, “just like doing stupid stuff in the middle of the hall. Just standing in the middle of the hall. That’s the worst thing that bothers me is just standing right in the middle of the hall... Just hanging out and chilling in like a big circle. I just don’t think they like care. They just talking to everybody and they don’t realize what they’re doing.” Logan admitted that black students were often not purposefully blocking hallways. Nonetheless, white students struggled to rein in harsh judgments of their black peers—even in cases in which they admitted that white students behaved similarly. Matt explained:

Like some of the [white] kids, we call the black people slow. Cause they block the hallways. But at the same time, like we don't have any room to talk cause I'm pretty sure there's a lot of us that do the same thing. But like, when...they're like being loud or obnoxious or like acting cocky, like you know just singing along

and acting mad, like even though we do the exact same things, it's like we kinda develop more of an annoyance and like, I guess we kind of like, group them together as the black people. As jumping loud and arrogant and obnoxious.

Matt's comments highlighted the resentment that white students felt toward black students, they also revealed the inability of white students to think about the behaviors of black students individually. Instead, when individual black students engaged in such behavior, they were negatively stereotyped as a group. Even though white students admittedly did "the exact same things," only black students were accused of being loud, obnoxious, cocky, arrogant, talking too much, acting mad and taking advantage of vulnerable peers.

#### **D. White Boys are Weak?**

For white male students, navigating racial intimidation was a more complicated endeavor because some black male students especially capitalized on their fears. Ryan, a white male student explained:

I feel like they think that they can like run the school maybe. Because they're like more loud and like [white students] are intimidated by them. I think sometimes black people like look at white people and like sometimes like think that they intimidate us or like they could like walk all over us... That's definitely not [true], especially not for me. Like the other day this black kid tried to like get in my face and I wasn't afraid to step back up and be like, "You have no idea what you're talking about, you just need to shut up and sit down," and like I had no problem. I think that when white people like retaliate, [black people] are like whoa.

Ryan believed that black students were taken aback by white students who challenged them because, "I think a lot of white people like are afraid of them." This fear was rooted in white students' lack of understanding of and exposure to the norms of their black peers, coupled with the stereotypes they had been socialized to believe. Much of the racial intimidation displayed by black students—especially black male students who were targeting white male students—capitalized on this fear. It was both a test and an opportunity to have a laugh (Willis, 1977). Black boys assumed that white boys were small, weak, punks, unless they were proven otherwise. However, when white students defended themselves, black boys backed down. Like their white peers who told racist jokes, black male students were not harassing their white peers because they actually

wanted to get into fights, rather they saw it as an opportunity to prove their own superiority and to amuse themselves in ways that they perceived to be harmless.

A number of the white male students in the study reported having experiences in which black males tested them in this way. For example, Danny told of the following interaction he and a white friend had with black students:

My friend, he was in the hallway just outside [a] class and these three big black people walk up to him and take his iPod and just start like passing it between each other like I don't have your iPod and pass it to their friend and he's like come on just give me my iPod back and they won't do it. And the only reason he [took] it was because he was white and he was just smaller than them. He got it back. [The teacher] came to the rescue....I don't think they would give it back [if she hadn't]. Like they were trying to make it seem like they didn't have it. Like they were hiding it and all that.

The black male students in this incident were using bullying as a form of entertainment. They took advantage of two students whom they perceived to be physically vulnerable—arguably due to the fact of their whiteness, rather than their actual size. When the teacher interrupted, they quickly returned the iPod and likely thought nothing much of the interaction. However, for the white students this event felt like an assault—an assault that served to reinforce the negative ideologies they already held about black people.

Curtis recounted a similar experience, although he reacted much differently: Last year I was sitting in the auditorium with my girlfriend and it was really like messed up how this kid [was] just like pretty much saying I'm soft cause I'm white. Cause like he kept poking me in the back of the head and I told him I was going to tell him three times and that's it, and then we're fighting. Cause he had to provoke me a lot. Like I'll give you three warnings and then it's, whatever. But he kept poking me in the back of the head and I kept telling him not to do it. And I was like, "Dude, I'll tell you one more time, if you do it again we're going to be fighting." He's like, "You, ain't going to do nothing you little white boy." And then that's when I yeah, went off on him....Yeah, he stopped.

Unlike Danny, who seemed unsure of how to get the iPod back, Curtis took the approach of Ryan—he attacked. In some ways, the social groups and schooling experiences of these white male students explained their different reactions. Curtis was a young man who had gotten into a lot of trouble in his life. He was a lower-income student who had a lot of problems at home. In addition, he had previously attended an all-black school. When compared to Danny, an upper-middle-class male student whose friends were all white, Curtis had more knowledge of how to respond to black students who were being

aggressive, and more confidence in making threats. Moreover, because of his background, his threats had merit. Curtis was not simply saying he was going to fight the student who poked him, he meant it. Danny did not have the same kind of recourse.

However, it was not mere coincidence that neither of these incidents concluded in actual physical conflict. Although it was okay to harass each other across race, it was not actually acceptable to get into physical fights across race. In turn, when it became clear to the black student doing the poking that continuing might lead to a real confrontation, he stopped. Despite all of the fear and threats, black students rarely actually attacked white students physically. Unfortunately, the same could not be said for their interactions with each other.

#### **E. Black on Black Crime and the Maintenance of the Racial Order**

Black students' reputation as racially intimidating and violent had some basis. Black students were notorious for being likely to engage in, and eagerly witness, physical fights. Although the sanctions for in-school fighting were strong enough to discourage most students during the school day, black students fought each other at a park nearby afterschool. These fights were almost always pre-planned. News of the fights was often spread by text message and word of mouth throughout the school day. Chelsea explained, "they don't want to fight in school and get suspended so it's like meet me at the Park and everyone piles in cars [to] go watch the fight." She said that this was a predominantly black endeavor, "I think the Park is more like a black place where they hang out. Like all the black boys play basketball and the girls just sit around on tables and talk." Because it was the social center of black out-of-school life, the park had also become the place where blacks students settled conflict. According to Chelsea, there were not class divisions when it came to fighting. Black students from all socio-economic backgrounds in the district were equally likely to be there. She said, "middle, rich, poor, live in apartments, they will go." In addition, unlike in-school physical violence in which male students were more likely to bully white students, male and females were equally likely to engage in fights at the park.

Once fights were announced during the school day, students faced considerable social pressure to follow through. As Kaleem explained, "If you don't fight you'd better

fight. If you make us go for nothing some people are gonna take care of you....Beat you up, you know.” The spectators who showed up to witness fights at the Park greatly outnumbered the students who actually fought. As Menna described it, “the entire black school,” was sometimes in attendance. Kiara said students went to see the fights “so they can say they were there, and...like you know so that they can spread the word about what happened. See sometimes I think people do consider it entertainment.” They watched the fights like they were the latest episode of a reality TV show, and treated them as no more significant than using racial slurs or making racial jokes. It was simply what black kids did—an expression of racial identity. This phenomenon suggested to all students that black people were more violent and should be feared. The irony of course was that black students were bigger threats to each other physically than they were to white students.

Patillo-McCoy (1999) similarly noted the ways in which black youth from middle-class backgrounds sometimes engaged in activities that were deviant. According to her:

Black working-class and middle-class youth are not exempt from the thrill and excitement of either stylistic deviance or actual criminal behavior. For that matter, neither are young rich and middle-class whites. There is little glamour in being simply middle class. In riches there is showy extravagance, and poverty demands a noble struggle. To be middle-class—more precisely lower middle class—is to be blah. Such youth of all races may be even more captivated by popular-culture styles that release them from the bonds of middle-class civility and mediocrity, and allow them, if only through their new outfits, to conspicuously transgress. Styles, however, have repercussions. (p. 118)

Patillo-McCoy’s analysis speaks to both the ways in which black students’ presentation of self set them up to be targeted and criminalized by white peers (and teachers) within schools, as well as how the thrill of transgression, mediated by the draw of popular culture, can lead to actual criminal behavior.

Arguably, the racial performances of black youth at Jefferson—especially their inclination to engage in physical conflict—were emulations of media depictions of blackness, rather than signals of the homes or communities these youth came from. According to Madison, a white student, “mainly more black people fight. I know a lot of people say white people can’t fight, black people can fight.” She ultimately thought these beliefs were because of “TV and stuff like that, cause if you think, like in all videos you

see black people, they're always fighting." Black youth saw themselves as "violent" and thus took hold of opportunities to prove the point. For many students at Jefferson, "Hollywood blackness"—the ways in which black people were portrayed in the public sphere, "on stage"—was no different than how they viewed themselves in the private sphere, "off stage" (Shryock, 2004). The economic and career success of their own parents did not serve to challenge these ideas.

It was unclear whether or not black students were conscious of the performative nature of their interactions. As Goffman (1959) writes on performance:

...the performer can be fully taken by his own act; he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality. When his audience is also convinced in this way about the show he puts on—and this seems to be the typical case—then for the moment at least, only the sociologist or the socially disgruntled will have any doubts about the 'realness' of what is presented. (p. 16)

However, whether or not black students believed their violent behavior to be rooted in authentic acts, or staged performances, they served to reproduce racial hierarchies by reinforcing notions of black criminality.

Nonetheless, black students also felt that media portrayals of violence in viral videos and shows like "Jackass" often depicted white males engaging in behavior that seemed extreme—even for black male students who were fighters. Dwayne said, "some white people are crazier than us. Like them ol' rock and roll people, I think they crazy. I mean they just do stupid stuff. Cause I have seen white boy videos when white boys hitting each other with poles. Yeah, ain't no black person going to do that." Despite the fact that this observation challenged broader stereotypes about the relationships between violence and blackness, students nonetheless thought fighting was the territory of black students. When white youth at Jefferson did fight it was usually explained away by students who claimed these white students were "wiggers"—not actually white at all. As Dwayne explained, whether or not white students fought depended upon "what white kids it is. Like if they hang out with the black people then they going to do the same thing we do. So if they hang out with white people then they just going to sit there and be quiet and watch."

Although it was culturally acceptable for black students to fight, and even encouraged, they realized that their behavior was shocking. When asked why black students were more likely to fight, Dwayne said, “I don’t know. Black people just, I think they just turning crazy. I mean I don’t know. I don't know why they fight. I have no clue why they fight.” Black students reported being “angry,” feeling “disrespected,” feeling the need to “prove they aren’t scared,” and the desire for “bragging rights,” as reasons for their fights. The desire of black students to prove a point, to express anger in a way that everyone could see, to show how strong they were, was one that a number of black students found disheartening. Menna, a female student who had also been involved in the fight with Bianca was dismayed about the culture of black students at the school. Exasperated she said:

It's always black people. It is. I mean you'll see some of the white people get into it once or twice but they handle it differently...I mean their ways of going about it are simple, “Okay, let’s talk about it and figure it out.” But it's like, the African Americans, black people it's always like, oh well you called me a name, okay well I'm gonna fight you and it's not just gonna be me fighting. It's gonna be me, you, and my “cousins” that I just met yesterday.

It was clear that young people at Jefferson had very stereotypical notions of what it meant to be “black” or “white.” Because these identities were thought to be immutable, black students found themselves in positions in which they were reinscribing stereotypes about themselves, and white students found it difficult to adopt the colorblind perspectives many had been taught they should hold. Interestingly, the presumed prowess of black students helped maintain racial conventions in which inter-racial fighting was not an option. Farrah explained, that as a general rule, “a black girl is not going to feel that it’s fair to fight a white girl. Because they think it’s not fair. Black girls going to have more power.” Because black people were presumed to be inherently better fighters, students believed that black and white students were not on equal playing fields when it came to physical altercations. It would be dishonorable for a black student to actually fight a white student. These clear lines of race at Jefferson both kept a lid on what might have otherwise been explosive racial tensions, and facilitated less dangerous forms of bullying and violence between students across race.

## V. RESPONSES TO RACIAL DOMINANCE

White students responded to the physical dominance of their black peers in three ways. Some expressed fear of black students. Others used the cover of crowded hallways to make clandestine derogatory comments. Finally, some pushed back—returning the physical assaults that they were receiving. Interestingly, all three of these responses maintained a racial order in which white students were able to justify their fear, bias and assault on their black peers.

### A. Fear

The most common response of white students to the racial intimidation of their black peers was fear. If black students were spending their days asserting their power, most white students were spending time positioning themselves as victims. Kaleem's analysis of the racial dynamics of the school was that in general, "The black people mostly are looking for the trouble and the white kids fear them, because the black people talk too much, they're ignorant and sometimes...they try to take advantage of people and stuff like that. The white kids fear the black kids. Not all of them but most of them." This fear was especially apparent in hallway interactions. As Will explained, "a lot of white people here are scared of the black kids. Cause like if they bump into you and you just look at them, they'll just get this look and they'll say, 'Oh, I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' and it might not even be their fault. I'm okay, you alright, I mean that's not that big of a deal you know." Will was a very kind black male student who did not bully white students in the ways that some of his peers did. Nonetheless, when white students accidentally bumped into him their immediate reaction was to fear that he might retaliate in some way.

White students admitted having such reservations. For example, Victoria told the following story:

Like there's this girl in one of my classes, and we were all talking one day cause we had a free day, and she said that she was actually scared to walk to her car by herself cause she's just a little white girl and she has to pass a bunch of black people [in the school parking lot]. She said in the hallway when she's like walking by herself she actually gets a little nervous. Like she said she bumped into some black girl or something and like she started going off. So she's always trying to watch out and stuff like that. Her exact words were like, 'I'm just a little

white girl.’ We were all like, well, I mean nobody’s going to do anything. I mean you have nothing to be afraid of or anything. I mean nothing’s going to happen unless you like do something, and she’s just like, “I don’t know, I just get nervous I don’t know why.” She doesn’t feel like comfortable in her own school, like that’s not a good way to feel...I thought that was sad.

Victoria struggled to make sense of the fear her white classmate felt when walking by people she considered friends. She was saddened that black students had the ability to instill fear in their white peers. However, she did not seem aware of the ways in which white students were criminalizing black youth by formatting them as people to be feared. That black students were also victims was never recognized—even among black students themselves.

### **B. Derogatory Comments**

Another way in which white students resisted black dominance was by making derogatory comments in the hallways. For example, Trevor, a black male student, reported that, “the other day somebody just said, ‘All these black people in the hallway are in the way!’ [and] I’m like whoa, where did that come from? That was just so random.” Trevor continued, “I tried to find out who said it, but there were so many people in the hallway I couldn’t find out who said it. I was looking around and nobody else seemed to react to it.” In some ways he felt it was lucky that he did not find the perpetrator because he worried that had he found him, there would have been a confrontation. “I don’t know how mad I would have been ‘cause I was angry at the time, but I couldn’t find out who said it so I let it go,” he said. The hallways were so crowded and the students moved by so quickly it was difficult to identify the source of racialized commentary. When white students engaged in this sort of behavior they were able to express their disdain anonymously and had cover to say things they otherwise would not. Interestingly, Trevor said that no one else in the vicinity reacted to this comment. While it was possible that other students did not hear it, the more likely reason was that comments of this sort were so frequent they were not noteworthy.

### **C. Pushing Back**

Some white students took their annoyance further than a random anonymous comment. Instead, they responded to the racial dominance of black students by

purposefully retaliating against them or pushing back. Logan said that when black students blocked the hallways he would often, “push their backpack out of the way and I keep going.” While these pushes did not lead to confrontations, Logan was aware that he was challenging the black students. Other white students retaliated more forcefully. Denise, a black student said she witnessed white students very aggressively push black students. Some white people, “just feel like they can just be disrespectful any time they want to be,” she said. “I was walking and a black [girl] bumped into a white [boy] and so the white [boy] pushed [her] and said, ‘I don’t like black people so don’t touch me,’ and stuff like that. I was like, ugh.” In this instance a white male student felt justified in aggressively harassing a black female student because he did not like black people. This cross-racial, cross-gender assault built on a long line of interrogations of black women’s bodies at the hands of white men (Collins, 2004).

Trevor also felt that racism may underlie the reactions of white students in the hallways. He explained, “I’m not gonna say racist ‘cause I don’t them personally, but I know that I do get bumped in the hallway by white people for no apparent reason.” While Trevor was angry about being purposefully pushed, he was also not surprised. He continued:

You can’t always blame that on white people because maybe, you know somebody did something to them so they’re just taking it out on the first black person they saw or the first male they saw, you know depending on what happened. So you can’t really group them together and say oh they’re racist ‘cause you never know... If it’s a soft tap then I’m not gonna trip. But if you purposely see me and you bump me, then there’s something wrong with that.

Trevor’s analysis spoke to the complicated nature of racial hostility. It was because race relations were already so tenuous that he believed white students could not be blamed for their actions. Rather, they were caught in a cycle of in which black and white students were equally opportunity offenders. Trevor recognized that in these instances he was simply in the line of fire in a battle that was far greater than any specific interaction between any two people.

Interestingly, black students similarly explained their own behavior. Farrah explained, “Black people like push through everybody like get out of my way and everything like that.” She said that they directly targeted white students, who were often

confused about why they were being pushed. She continued, “black kids won’t even usually do that to black kids. I don’t really know why, I guess it’s cause of anger or something.” In turn, black and white students at Jefferson were not simply joking, they were not merely looking for ways to entertain themselves, they were angry. This anger was one that was highly regulated and had clear boundaries. While students could make racial jokes, use racial slurs, and bump into each other in hallways, there were almost never actual fights across race in the hallways. Instead, there were a series of aggressions—pushes, shoves, anonymous comments—that were always kept in check by the norms of racial interaction and ideas about the ways in which violence was racialized.

## **VI. CONCLUSION: THE BULLY OF THE BULLY**

The interactions of students at Jefferson High School across race and class were rooted in hyper-racialized exchanges that made it difficult for them to form meaningful connections across racial difference. These hyper-racialized interactions led to two very different forms of racial bullying. White students used jokes, racial slurs, and other racialized discourse to verbally assault black students and other students of color in the school. Black students often colluded with this bullying by laughing along, failing to interrupt these behaviors, and at times, joking back. Nonetheless, they were affected. Privately, many admitted their struggle to reconcile the pressure they felt to act like racism was “no big deal,” and their sense that something was very wrong with their daily interactions with white students. Because many accepted the narrative they saw in the media and heard on the streets that they were culturally inferior, they lived up to the stereotypes. They were loud, ghetto, and gangster, even in instances in which these performances seemed to directly contradict their class positions. Arguably, black students had only their “cool” personas to give them validation within their school—a space where they were regularly oppressed and demoralized. Many black students held tightly to these performances of racial identity in their efforts to be seen, often enacting their identity in ways that were domineering and purposefully intimidating.

While white students were bullying black students verbally, black students were using their cultural dominance to bully white students through physical intimidation and threats of violence. By blocking hallways and bumping into their white peers, black

students made clear the perceived physical inferiority of their white counterparts. However, unlike the verbal assaults, which white and black students had convinced themselves were non-impactful, the racial intimidation of black students was shunned by white students. In other words, when white students assaulted black students through one-sided racial jokes and racial slurs, they were protected by the cloak of post-racial ideologies. When black students engaged in similar behavior, they were reifying stereotypes of black people as dangerous, ghetto, and in need of control. Ultimately, white students held the power to decide the terms of racial engagement and were the decision-makers about what constituted racial hostility, bullying, and discrimination—despite the fact that they were often wrestling with racist ideologies that permeated their own families and communities, and their own minds.

These dynamics created a culture in which students' racial narratives were contradictory. They argued for both a post-racial school in which everyone got along at the same time as white students called black students niggers in fits of anger and black students admitted that they ran white students down. They claimed to be of a generation in which there was increasing racial comfort, at the same time as they had racially homogenous friend circles and ate in segregated cafeterias. Their interactions indicated that students were struggling to make sense of racial differences, and often tested the waters in ways that harkened back to a racist past they thought they had moved beyond. Left uninterrupted, their behaviors and comments could develop into sustained prejudicial attitudes. And yet, adults witnessing these interactions everyday in classrooms and hallways did nothing to challenge this culture.

Stephanie, believed adults struggled to interrupt what was happening because their own history of negative race relations had laid the foundation for student hostilities:

It has to do with like Jefferson's history cause [this area] did have riots back in like the 60s and the 70s and there was so much racial tension in this whole like area. I think that people just won't like forgive and forget and just like be like, "You know what, that wasn't...you that like burned down that shop, that wasn't you, that was like people 30, 40, 50 years ago that did that." I think a lot of people out here are taught, not necessarily...flat out like, "oh, you're a white kid, listen you don't hang out with black people," or, "you're a black kid you don't hang out with white people," I think it's just like underlying. Like parents will make little remarks, like the students do. Like just little hits of racism and then it builds up and the next thing you know you've raised a full blown racist.

Stephanie summarized rather astutely what was happening at Jefferson. Jefferson students came from a school and community in which there was an ongoing series of racial digs that adults seemed all too willing to ignore. As a result, likely without even knowing it, they were raising “full-blown racists” who would enter their adult lives with biases, prejudices, and beliefs of “blackness” as the “social bottom” (Harrison, 1995, 1998) that they had, for many years, assumed were just jokes.

Jefferson was not significantly different from most schools in the country. Students were trying to figure out how to make meaning of race, class, and other social identities around which they witnessed difference, but had little support or guidance regarding how to do so appropriately. According to Stephanie, intervening in the hyper-racialized interactions, racial biases, and tensions of students at Jefferson “would take years and years of like deprogramming. Like some of these people are set in their ways so much that you’d have to definitely like go back and re-teach them a lot of stuff.” Unfortunately, most Jefferson teachers did not have the awareness, knowledge, skill, or confidence to do this.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **Colorblind/Colordeaf/Colormute:**

### **How Teachers Make Sense of Race and What They Do About It**

#### **I. INTRODUCTION**

I was sitting in my office during 6<sup>th</sup> hour when I heard a word being shouted loudly in the hallway. I waited a moment and listened again. Surely it must be SENIOR I was hearing. No! They were definitely saying NIGGER in long, drawn out syllables: NIIIIIGGGEERRR! I got up out of my chair so quickly that I almost fell, forgetting to put on the shoes I had taken off. I got to the door just in time to see a group of four white male students, along with one mixed race male student walk by. NIGGER, they said again. Standing barefoot in the hallway, I counted. Seven times in a row, down two long hallways, the boys shouted NIGGER at the top of their lungs. No teacher stopped them. No one stopped them. No one came out of their room to see what was happening. No one responded. No one did anything. Soon after they faded into the distance the teacher next to me opened her door, stepped into the hallway, and gave me a knowing look. I assumed she had heard and went over to talk to her. She did not say anything about the boys but rather asked me how my day had been. When I saw her later that week I asked her if she had heard the incident. She said she had not.

-Fieldnote, November 2, 2010

The day in which the above incident took place was not unlike many days I spent at Jefferson. I was sitting in my office and a hyper-racial exchange happened right in front of my door. While shocking, this event only served to confirm what I had already discovered—students raised issues of race, couched as jokes, overtly, regularly, and in ways that reinscribed racial hierarchies. However, this particular incident added another piece to the puzzle of race relations at Jefferson—that of teacher intervention or, rather, the lack thereof. Standing in the hallway looking after the group of boys I was focused not on who they were, what they were doing, or why, but rather on what the teachers in the hallway would do in response. Though tempted, I did not interrupt these young men myself. I waited to see if anyone else would. What I witnessed confirmed that teachers at Jefferson went to great lengths to avoid race.

When it came to race-related issues teachers claimed to be colorblind and colordeaf, and as a result, they were colormute. In other words, they said they did not see or hear racial problems and so did not talk to students or each other about race. They didn't take advantage of opportunities to engage students in meaningful dialogue about

the ways in which race mattered in their lives.<sup>48</sup> They didn't use racially disaggregated data to inform their practice. They didn't stop groups of students walking down the hallway screaming Nigger.

This chapter explores how teachers did, and did not, address issues of race at Jefferson. It juxtaposes teachers' avoidance of race against their own hyper-racialized exchanges with students—exchanges in which race was impossible to ignore. Like those of students, these interactions were largely framed as “jokes,” and like student jokes, just beneath the surface were actual hostilities and biases.

In addition, it investigates how teachers with very different racial ideologies worked together to silence race. While some adopted positions of colorblindness in which they claimed not to observe racial differences between students, a significant number were conscious of the ways in which race mattered. However, all teachers were ultimately afraid to deal with race in any practical way. As a result, teachers used strategies of avoidance, invoking colorblind frames to explain racial disparities and problematic racial interactions between students, even as their own interactions with students were hyper-racial.

## **II. FAILURE TO INTERVENE/FAILURE TO ENGAGE**

### **A. Teachers Do Not Intervene in Hyper-racialized Student Interactions**

Some of the times they'll be like, “Come on guys, that's enough.” Some of the times they'll not notice or sometimes... sometimes I think they pretend not to know....Maybe they know we're just playing around, you know. Like sometimes I'll see the teachers ignoring a lot of things people do or say...just to avoid conflict I guess.  
-Salim, Arabic, 12<sup>th</sup> grade

As seen in Chapters 4 and 5, students at Jefferson regularly made racial jokes, used racial slurs, and engaged in physical racial intimidation in hallways. Moreover, they sat in segregated lunchrooms and admitted to holding deep-seated racial biases that reinscribed notions of black inferiority. However, for the most part, teachers did not

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<sup>48</sup> Many studies have found that teachers go out of their way to avoid discussions of race. For example, in his study of Latino and white students in Texas, Foley (1990) reported that “teachers generally made few attempts to alter the racial and class segregation in classrooms and in student activities. Many teachers felt like they were ‘walking on eggshells’ to avoid racial issues” (p. 102) even though the racial joking happening among students made it clear that “the race issue was unavoidable.

intervene in these exchanges. Moreover, most teachers claimed not to hear them. For example, when asked about racial slurs teachers said:

*Ms. Kennedy:* You know, I don't hear it. I hear [fag] far more.

*Ms. Ladig:* I mean, I haven't heard any kids...call each other you know, racial derogatory.... but my room is pretty well integrated.

*Ms. Valenzuela:* In my class I haven't heard it.

Teachers responded similarly to questions about the racial jokes happening between students:

*Ms. Meguschar:* I have not heard them...I've never heard like racial jokes for the most part.

*Ms. Ladig:* No, never heard, no.

*Ms. Dunlap:* Not in my classroom. I don't hear black jokes, I don't hear gay jokes...

Some teachers conceded that although they personally had not heard the jokes, it was possible that students were engaging in this sort of behavior elsewhere:

*Ms. Mayes:* I have never heard that once. That doesn't mean it's not occurring...maybe they're smart enough not to do it around me.

*Mr. Edwards:* Is there [racial jokes]? I haven't heard it...but I think they're smart enough not to say it right in front of a teacher.

*Ms. Guthrie:* Oh no, if they're joking about it out in the hall I don't hear it.

While teachers said they did not hear these interactions, as Salim commented, most students thought teachers simply ignored them. Robyn explained:

Usually teachers don't hear it. Like 'cause when students will say like the racial slurs and what-not, it'll be usually under their breath. Or like in the hallway if it gets rowdy and like, say an African American student cuts off, [a white student] will be like, "Oh, N-word"...I don't think they hear it 'cause usually the teachers are doing their own little thing when those things happen....I'm sure the teachers see it but they don't say anything.

While Robyn initially said that teachers "don't pay attention" she also believed that teachers were cognizant of what was happening but were reluctant to intervene. Almost all of the students reported they believed teachers only *pretended* not to hear these

interactions. For example, Whitney said, “Maybe [teachers] just want to pretend like they don’t hear it, or something...they ignore it, like it never happened.” When asked why teachers would do that she responded, “Maybe because...there will be drama or something.” In turn, students were very aware that something was happening in their school that adults were not addressing.

When teachers did intervene, they either told students to “stop” what they were doing, with no further discussion. Usually teachers only pursued one of these options if things between students escalated to the point that they couldn’t be ignored. Many different students gave examples of how teachers intervened:

*Harrison (white male):* They just ignore it and let them do what they want for the most part. I mean if it’s really offensive I think a teacher will like jump in and say, “No, don’t do that.”

*Riley (white female):* I think in the hallway that, I’ve never heard a teacher say anything because...they’ve already walked by. And then in the classroom, some teachers will just ignore it and be totally oblivious to things going on. And other teachers will say, “Hey stop, that’s not right, get back to work.”

In these examples, students reported that teachers’ first response was always to “ignore” what had happened. They only interrupted these events if a student expressed being offended or if it happened repeatedly and overtly. In other words, student responses to the incidents was what motivated teacher intervention.

In a few instances, teachers responded by threatening students with referrals. Felicia said she had heard a teacher say, “Chill out, don’t do that anymore, you wan a referral or something like that?” Willie also said, that teachers “either tell you to stop, or they might even write you up or they might threaten to write you up...” However, Trevor said, “I’ve never seen a teacher actually like write anybody up or do anything to anybody just cause somebody said somebody was racist.”

Teachers also admitted that they often did not interrupt the racial jokes that they heard. Some said they were confused about how to navigate a racial world very different from that of their own adolescence. As Ms. Knadler, a white teacher, explained:

Well you know how it’s easier for us as adults...to pursue something as quote “really serious or problematic” when the kids will say, “Well no, we’re just playing around...” And I can’t tell. It’s enigmatic to me. Sometimes it’s puzzling. Like I’m not certain and then I end up looking really, quote “square,

old fashion...” just because I don’t know if they’re really being sarcastic, facetious or if they are actually insulting one another. So I’m sure you’re overhead loads of exchanges here. Like, I can’t tell sometimes.... I have heard again some racial jokes, which I always find really upsetting, but they act like they’re just kidding around.

Like students, teachers believed that if a student claimed they were joking after they said something racist, perhaps they were the ones making too big of a deal about it. As a result, even when white teachers interrupted these exchanges, they never addressed the content of them. Instead, I observed teaches say things like, “Knock it off,” “Hey, unnecessary,” or “We don’t use that term.” They never talked to students about race.

## **B. Teachers Do Not Proactively Bring Up Race**

Nope...we never talk about race....Maybe teachers are uncomfortable.  
-Farrah, African American

In talking with students and teachers about how they intervened in overt racial exchanges and observing classrooms, it became clear that teachers did not proactively address race either. Over and over again when asked if they talked about race, class, stereotypes, segregation, diversity, or bullying, students from all grade levels, and all backgrounds responded, “No”:

*Shayla:* Do teachers ever say hey ya’ll seem interested in race. This is a diverse school. Let’s talk about race?

*Brielle (mixed race):* No.

*Shayla:* Let’s talk about stereotypes, let’s talk about segregation...

*Brielle:* No.

*Shayla:* ...let’s talk about bullying?

*Brielle:* No, we’ve never talked about that in any class I’ve ever had. It’s all strictly whatever the class is for, that’s what you go for.

*Shayla:* Do teachers talk about race in class?

*Trevor (black):* No.

*Shayla:* Do they say like oh, it seems like you all are interested in this subject?

*Trevor:* No. They just go on with their initial learning plan.

*Shayla:* Okay, beyond just kind of reprimand do they ever say...you all talk about race a lot. Let’s talk about it?

*Bethany (white):* I don’t think any of my teachers have. Some might but I’ve only been going here two years...

Although students repeatedly said they never talked about race (or class) in school, the truth was that issues of race did come up in English and Social Studies classes. Most students at Jefferson read *Huckleberry Finn*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Of Mice and Men*, or *A Raisin in the Sun*. All of these books are American classics that deal with some aspect of U.S. race relations. Moreover, 9<sup>th</sup> grade social studies teachers taught the Civil Rights Movement as a part of the standard curriculum.

In turn, students' comments that they never talked about race reflected two things that my observations confirmed. First, race was restricted to course units that dealt explicitly with racial history and ethnic history months. As Chelsea, a black student put it, "I don't think teachers like really like to talk about all that, like unless it's like African American month or something." Whitney agreed that in general they did not talk about race in class, but when they did "it's usually when we do the slavery chapters." Sarah, a white student, said race only came up "like if we're reading a book and there's something in it." Teachers agreed with these assessments. When describing her own course, Ms. Kennedy said:

I do talk about it in class... We will when we get to that. I don't know if it's the next unit or the unit after. It's the Civil War unit where some of that African, the old Negro Spirituals come up, and then we get into after that, *Of Mice and Men*, which is 1930s, so that section we do talk about it.

Beyond these required moments, race was not raised.

The second thing I observed was that when these topics did come up it was not done in a discussion oriented way. As Whitney explained, even when they were doing the slavery chapters, "we never really get into diversity and that kind of stuff." Harrison, a white student, said race was sometimes brought up, "maybe as like a journal entry, but that's not talking about it... we just write in our journal and go on with the day." In other words, even in instances in which teachers presented content on race, they often did not engage students in any kind of meaningful dialogue or what Guinier and Torres (2002) call a "political race project"—one in which there is "an effort to change the framework of the conversation about race by naming relationships to power within the context of our racial and political history" (p. 15). Race was treated as a static historical phenomenon, rather than a dynamic, socially constructed reality that continued to have salience in students' lives.

### C. Fear of a Racist Planet

Teachers admitted that much of what stopped them from intervening in hyper-racial student interactions and proactively engaging students in conversations about race was fear. They were afraid it would lead to student conflict, they were afraid parents would get upset, and mostly, they were afraid of being called racist. This fear was present even among teachers who had to address race-related content in their classes. For example Ms. Stovall, a social studies teacher, said that although she tries to challenge the problematic things students say, “I don’t stop the whole class and say let’s talk about it. And I think sometimes that may be a good idea, to address these issues. But again, opening a can of worms. I don’t want it to explode...I’m more fearful that it’ll turn racist than the other way. And I don’t want that to happen. So I avoid it.” A few teachers were fearful of things getting out of hand because of previous experiences in which conversations about race had gone poorly. For example, years before this study began another social studies teacher had tried to engage students in a conversation about stereotypes that resulted in accusations of racism and increased student conflict. Brandy explained:

They had to...take turns going out on the board, and they had to write down a whole bunch of um, racist stereotypes. And then they discussed them and I guess it became like a huge debate and huge conflict. Like they don’t do it anymore because it became such a problem. Like it went home to parents and parents emailing complaining.

Mr. McPhee had had a similar experience when he tried to talk to students about race:

It’s happened to me in the past when we were reading *Raisin in the Sun*...When the white guy comes in and he’s clearly being racist...so we have conversations about that portion. And there’s been this heated debate back and forth between the students. It was like four years ago...but I think I was just like, enough, we have to stop. Lets move on. ‘Cause it wasn’t very productive anymore.

In turn, in the rare moments in which a teacher did attempt to engage in this conversation, they often lacked the facilitation skills to do so in a way that was productive and usually did not do so again.

Teachers’ worries about backlash were real. Virtually all of the teachers who had to deal with race in their curriculum had received complaints from parents at some point. According to Ms. Mitchell when, “...teaching something like *To Kill a Mockingbird* or

*Of Mice and Men* where that word [the N-word] comes up and you have to offer the disclaimer...you know inevitably you'll get some phone calls from parents who just don't understand and don't trust the teacher to teach that word in context." She said this happened with both black and white parents who believed, "...that word shouldn't be even brought up in school...they're just uncomfortable with it. And I think that's part of it...we tend to...push it under the rug and hide from it rather than dealing with it face-on because we're afraid of the ramifications, the backlash...so we hide from it and then that just creates more confusion." To many teachers, the possibility of backlash from parents was too much of a risk, especially at Jefferson, where parents were "very pushy and...wield a lot of power and...we let them run the show....You know just there's a fear on our end."

Ms. Armstrong had a similar experience. When reading *Raising in the Sun*, an African American mother told her that "I must be okay with books that have the N-word in them." Ms. Scott believed that when it came to race, "this system just breeds this crap." She said when she attempted to diversify the reading list a few years back "a couple of kids, the ones that really seemed like they could be members of the KKK...their family, they were like, 'Are we going to read any white literature?' And I was like, 'We did Shakespeare.'" Despite the fact that her students "loved it! They'd come in, 'Are we reading today? Are we listening to the tape [of *Black Boy*] today? And if we were doing something else they were just dying..." the risk ultimately proved too great. By the time I arrived she was no longer teaching *Black Boy*.

Teachers were not just afraid of how students and parents would respond they were also concerned that by bringing up race they would be as Ms. Davie put it, "labeled a racist." Mr. Sallee explained:

People are afraid to ask questions. Because it sounds like you're either ignorant or you're being a racist if you ask, "Why did you do this or why did you do that?" 'Cause it does sound like, "Why did *you people* do that?"...There's this fear between us, asking those questions or asking them wrong is going to make us look bad. So we just don't do it.

Some of the fear stemmed from the fact that a number of the teachers had negative experiences in their previous attempts to talk about race with people of color. On multiple occasions, white teachers privately revealed that they had been accused of being racist or

had been shamed with talking about race. For example, at a former job Ms. Conger had a racially hostile interaction with an African American woman. Since that time—over a decade prior to this study—Ms. Conger had been very reluctant to engage in conversations about race. She described her feelings:

I don't know what I did. And this woman hated me....I don't judge all black people by her...because...I've had enough positive experiences that that isn't the first thing that comes up.... But I am afraid to bring up race stuff because what did I do that was wrong? I don't know what I did that was wrong. Right now, talking to you, I don't know what I did that was wrong. So what [else] am I gonna say? What else might I say that's wrong, that's out of line, that's offensive? And how is [what happened] bad? How is that a bad thing?...Can you answer that for me? I'm asking you. Is that a bad thing?

In addition to explaining her fear that she might say something problematic again, Ms. Conger repeatedly asked me if I thought she was racist in the situation. This happened a number of times during my study. White teachers reported feeling silenced, attacked, and invalidated in their attempts to talk race and, as a result, had not spoken of it again. They were scared of being called racist, to some extent, because many of them already had been. Unfortunately, they were unable to step back from these experiences and view them as mistakes they could grow from. Rather, white teachers' experiences with parents, colleagues, and in their broader life had left many of them feeling as Pollock (2004) described, “emotionally scarred by experiences with racism...scarred by experiences with unsuccessful race talk” (p. 218). Moreover, they were not knowledgeable or confident enough about issues of race to see the ways in which, in some instances, they were being manipulated by someone else who was struggling with their own race issues.

Because white teachers had such limited cross-racial interactions and few opportunities in which they felt comfortable talking about race, my role in the school was particularly unique. More than one teacher reported that the conversation we had was the first time they had ever talked substantially with a person of color about race. Ms. Guthrie was one example:

*Ms. Guthrie:* I feel very comfortable talking to you and it's probably cause you have been around white people enough that you know how to negotiate to their...and you, there's something about I feel safe talking to you.

*Shayla:* I'm special and magical.

*Ms. Guthrie:* No, no you are not, there are some people that I, that I couldn't...

What Ms. Guthrie shared with me was a conundrum that almost every teacher at Jefferson, and arguably most teachers in the United States, faced when it came to issues of race and social justice. They were being asked to do things and address issues in their classrooms, with their colleagues and their students that they had not done in their own lives. Ms. Guthrie said I was one of the first people of color she had ever talked to at any length about race. This was true for many of the teachers, as well as many of the students. As a result many of the conversations I had with teachers either became confessionals in which they attempted to work out their deep-seated race issues, or opportunities for them to get feedback on their attempts to have conversations about race with students.

For example, Ms. Stovall, was interested in incorporating content on lynching in her class. However, she did not feel supported by colleagues or administrators. During an interview she asked me to weigh in on how she should approach this subject matter:

When I do the Civil Rights unit, and I should ask your opinion about this....These people were brave...And I think that people don't realize how vicious racism was and that's why we can't joke about it ...I tried to bring that up, but it was hard because I think it didn't go over well with some white students....But I don't know what do you think about that?....'Cause I'm worried. What goes through my mind, is that there's some kooky [white] guy in here that's going to do something kooky. Or as an African American male, how does that feel to hear this?

The remainder of this interview became a conversation about how Ms. Stovall might prepare herself to effectively broach this topic with students, and ended in her asking if I might come to her class to assist her. This is to say that teachers were in such need of support when it came to talking about race many of them saw me as their only resource. In some ways this complicated my role and challenged the line between researcher and colleague. However, in other ways it illuminated the real internal struggles teachers faced when thinking about race. Moreover, it showed how concern for students, in addition to fear for oneself, worked together to create a situation in which most teachers just avoided the topic altogether.

While white teachers almost never talked to students about race, a few did use their black counterparts to intervene with students. In particular, the one black female teacher was often charged with addressing black students who used the N-word. I was often in her classroom during lunch when she was showing students videos about Emmet Till or giving them lectures. Stephanie explained:

Oh my gosh! Ms. Gayles has kids coming in her class all the time or she's talking to kids all the time telling them to stop using that word....A lot of times they do end up sending the students that say like racial comments to [her] because she can give them the hour long lecture that is full of information, valid information.

Ms. Davie also took note of the propensity of her colleagues to rely upon the black female teacher to deal with race:

I know that there are teachers that call on the black female teacher when they talk about racism....I think it was nice that [the white teacher] called and asked for any kind of help and that the [black] teacher was willing to do it on her own and at the same time we all should be able to do that. It shouldn't just have to depend on one person.

Unfortunately, because so few white teachers were comfortable addressing these issues there was an undue burden placed upon the few black staff in the building who white teachers felt should "deal with" race.

## **II. THE GAME OF RACISM: HYPER-RACIALIZED STUDENT/TEACHER INTERACTIONS**

I bet like, they're scared of like some students reporting to the office that they were being racist. That gets thrown around so much in this school.  
-Bethany, white, 11<sup>th</sup> grade

Although teachers avoided talking to students about race, their own interactions with students were, nonetheless, hyper-racialized. While most teachers, and a number of students passed off these interactions as "jokes" or "convenient excuses," another narrative suggested that many students—especially black students—did in fact believe that their teachers treated them differently. In turn, like the interactions of students, the game of racism among students and teachers was only a thinly veiled cover for actual teacher bias and students' feelings that they were being discriminated against.

## A. Accusations of Racism

Students' public accusations of teacher "racism" were often "just play—getting on a teachers' nerves."  
-Mica Pollock, *Colormute*, p. 71

A black person will say anybody's racist just...because they felt they were done wrong so they'll be like oh, that person's racist...instead of actually dealing with the problem... 'Cause most of the time they know it wasn't [racist] and they're just mad. But sometimes they might actually think that depending on what happened.  
-Trevor, black, 12<sup>th</sup> grade

Teachers and students at Jefferson High School engaged in complicated, hyper-racialized performances in which "racism" was often invoked as a joke. According to both groups, students used accusations of racism to test teachers, to make their peers laugh, to get themselves off the hook for poor behavior or low grades and, as will be seen, in genuine efforts to call out perceived teacher bias. There were two versions of racist accusations. In the most common, students would say things like, "You just did that because I'm white" or "You just said that because I'm black." Mr. Wade explained these interactions:

Whenever anything gets said to any kid about anything, it was automatically, she's saying something because I'm black. She's saying something because I'm white....A [white teacher] said something to [a white girl] one day, and she walks up and goes, "This is cause I'm white." So is she!...I heard that from kids all the time....That's just the excuse du jour.

As Mr. Wade noted, the "because I'm..." argument was prevalent at Jefferson. Almost every teacher asked revealed that, at some point, such an accusation had been directed at them.

The second way in which racism was played by students was through explicit accusations that teachers were racist. On occasion, this happened in front of teachers, but it was much more likely to take place among students away from teachers. Unlike the "because I'm..." arguments, these comments were not passed off as jokes. Rather, the students making such accusations often did so in very serious ways that suggested they believed racial bias had mediated some aspect of their interactions with teachers.

In most instances, black students and white teachers were at the center of these exchanges. As Ms. Mendenhall described, "I've had white kids say I'm racist too...just using the term, because they hear it said." However, she found that in general, "It tends to

be more honestly [something] black students would say...I think we have that whole, you know, you go back...to slaves and of course, 'Woe is me,' and I'm like you know what, everybody has a woe is me story in their life...so knock it off...Let's get past that."

Interestingly, Ms. Mendenhall, recognized that these accusations were more prevalent among black students because they were tied to a specific historical context. However, like students, teachers held tightly to the belief that the history of racial injustice ended with the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. Rather than acknowledging some of the ways in which these hierarchies remained, and the possibility that students were being critical of this in their commentary, Ms. Mendenhall believed they should just "knock it off." Implicit in this suggestion was that if black students could "get past" race, it would no longer be an issue.

Most explained accusations of racism as jokes that were "no big deal." According to Mr. Bozeman, students would say that he was racist or that he was doing something because of their race, "but then the kid is laughing at the same time." He believed that when students made these comments, "It's just totally a joke because it's not true at all and they know it's not true...I really think it is [a joke]. It doesn't sound like it should be something to joke over, but it is." Students like Brielle, who had a white mother and a black father, agreed that although it may be unbelievable, race had become something to joke about in society more broadly. In the following excerpt I relayed an exchange to her that I witnessed between a white teacher and a group of black students:

*Shayla:* Did you hear what just happened in the hallway when we were walking over here?

*Brielle:* I wasn't really listening.

*Shayla:* There were students hanging outside the door saying [a teacher] said that they were late three days in a row. Did you hear that? And then we walked by, they said...

*Brielle:* Probably they said, "Is it cause I'm black?" or something.

*Shayla:* They said, "It's cause I'm black," and they said, "Why did they let that dark gorilla guy, that black gorilla in? African booty scratcher."

*Brielle:* Wow. I don't know. It's like, I mean I say that too, like me and my mom joke around like and my mom tells me to empty the dishwasher then I was like,

“Oh, is it ‘cause I’m black,” like it’s just like a joke I guess....I don’t know. I just say it ‘cause like I mean in the society we live in like rap songs and stuff, there’s like a lot of stuff about race and stuff and that’s just how people joke nowadays.

Accusations of racism and racial joking were so prevalent that Brielle easily guessed what had taken place in the hallway. A group of black students standing outside the room of a white teacher had racial implications at Jefferson. Like Danny, from Chapter 4, Brielle believed that talking about race in this manner was simply what people did.

The second way in which teachers and students made sense of accusations of racism was by suggesting that students—particularly students of color—used racism as an “excuse” for poor behavior and low-academic achievement. Ed, a white student explained:

Some black kids...when they don’t do their homework, they blame all the white teachers. They say they’re racist....They just use it as an excuse....Because they just don’t feel like doing their work and they think it’s just a game. They think high school’s just a game and then they’re gonna be the ones on the street either shooting somebody or robbing something. It’s both the colors too....anyone who’s not doing well in school.

Ed was a fairly low-achieving student who had failed many classes himself. But like Danny in Chapter 4, narratives of racism and racial performance allowed white low-achieving, poorly-behaved students to separate themselves from their black peers. Although Ed eventually said that “anyone” was likely to accuse teachers of racism if they were not doing well, he initially thought of this as a uniquely black excuse. His comments indicated that he bought into stereotypes of black students as violent and dangerous and saw the game of racism as supporting evidence.

Black students also believed that racism had become an excuse for poor behavior—especially being loud and talkative. According to Jada, many black students would say things like, “this teacher is racist because I’m black and she kicks me out of class every day.” She believed the question those students should be asking is “What are you doing to get kicked out of class?...So did that make her racist when you deliberately did what she told you not to?” Stella said she thought students used racism, “too loosely you know...Like every little thing like, ‘Oh that’s racist.’” She believed that many students said it because “it’s the first thing that comes to their mind...I don’t think they really think about what they’re saying, like the deeper meaning of it, you know. I think

they see it as black and white. He's white, he's yelling at me. That's racist." Because many students agreed that "racism" was overused in the school, like the boy who cried wolf, they believed it held little weight.

Teachers found accusations of racism frustrating. Most were unsure of how they should respond. The majority simply ignored the comments of students, choosing not to acknowledge them in any way. Those color-conscious teachers who were more comfortable talking about race often confronted the students, usually with witty, annoyed comebacks that silenced the student, but still did not ultimately address the issue. For example, when Ms. McCandless's student said that she was giving them homework because they were black. She responded, "Yeah, that's right. Everybody is getting homework because you're black." Mr. Wade similarly used dry wit to respond. He said, "I'll walk up and I go, 'God, I hate white people' [or] I say, 'No man, I don't hate you because you're black, I hate all you kids.'" Ms. Wenzell also talked about joking back. She often confused students because she did not challenge their accusations. Instead she would just agree and say:

"Yeah, yeah, you can't do that because you're black." And people got quiet and looked... "Are you saying that to me? Like really?" You know. I'll throw it right back at you. I mean, white people can't be afraid to... they can't walk on egg shells because they know they've always been wrong, and black people can't use that as an excuse to be hateful and not do what they need to do.

If accusations of racism were merely student jokes gone too far, the responses of these teachers would have been adequate. Arguably, in instances in which students were being careless, these teachers challenged them. However, as the following sections will reveal, there was much more going on between students and teachers when it came to race. Accusations of racism between students and teachers were no more "light" than racial humor between students.

## **B. Teachers Make Racial Jokes**

Teachers also played the game of race. A number of students of color reported incidents in which white teachers made explicitly racist jokes about them in class. For example, Salim told me that he was not only called a "terrorist" by his peers, one of his white female teachers also made jokes in class about him being a terrorist. While he

mostly shrugged off these interactions, many of his peers revealed how horrified they were by this teachers' comments. However, because of the power dynamics, students were even more silenced when the perpetrator of these interactions was a teacher. Teachers were older, they were figures of authority, and they had power over students' grades and whether or not students would be labeled "bad." When students were put in the position of having to consider how to respond to racial jokes made by individuals in such a position, it was even more challenging.

Kaleem reported that many of his teachers made fun of the fact that he was African. He particularly struggled with one of his teachers:

*Kaleem:* I mean he made a lot of jokes about me, I didn't mind that but...

*Shayla:* Like what?

*Kaleem:* Like an illegal alien, things like that, but I didn't mind that you know. Like one day I was absent and he said, "He probably got deported back to Africa," and things like that. But I took it as a joke because I'm a person that can take a joke pretty hard. So I came back to him and I called him the king of the douche bags and he took that really personal and then he started being mean.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Kaleem admitted that in instances such as this he was known to "jokingly" accuse teachers of racism. Kaleem had previously stated that many black students used racism as an excuse, but he continued, "Even I've done that, I've done that with my coach. I thought he really never liked me and this was when I used to be bad...and then I would say he calls me out because I'm black and he would make racist jokes and things like that." Kaleem's experience brought accusations of racism full circle. He revealed that he had accused teachers of being racist and used it to distract from his poor behavior. However, his testimony added another dimension to the analysis—he used this accusation in instances in which teachers were already making racial jokes about him. Whether or not his poor behavior was the cause or result of these jokes was impossible to determine. However, it indicated that teachers often engaged around race in ways that were as problematic as students. Moreover, because teachers held power they could decide how this "game of racism" that they were choosing to engage in would affect their students.

Other students noted that teachers often made jokes about black students being drug dealers. For example, Brandy told the following story:

One of my friends, he was kind of, going like this (hand gesture) to a student, I think they were just playing around or whatever...And she said, "what are you doing? Selling drugs?" and he was a black student and she was a white teacher. And um, you know he kind of then laughed at it, but then later on talked about it like, "I can't believe she said that!"...It just, it was rude. It was very rude....She's said something similar to that...a few times...Like I thought about um, reporting it to the administration, but I didn't want my name to get all in there. I didn't want to make a big deal.

Like her observations of white students in Chapter 4, Brandy felt she should do something but struggled with what. In this case, the power dynamics made figuring out how to respond even more complex.

In part, teachers engaged with students in this way because, like students, they used racial joking in their own personal interactions across race. A number of white teachers said that they engaged in this kind of banter with black adults. These admissions included everything from having a black friend who called them "honky" to jokes about being a "dumb blond" or being Polish or Italian. These interactions allowed teachers to both write off students' joking and justify their own problematic jokes. However, one teacher admitted that even with his own friends these jokes sometimes crossed the line. He explained, "It'll come out wrong. You intend to be joking, but it's too serious and then ends the conversation." Nonetheless, the jokes teachers talked about engaging in with their own friends were categorically different than those of students, if for no other reason than that in all of the incidents they reported, they were the targets of these jokes. It was "whiteness" that was being made fun of in these interactions. While this was not necessarily appropriate, it was not the same as what was happening at Jefferson, a school in which there were not white jokes among students or teacher.

### **C. Racism is Not a Game: The Conflict Between Black Students and White Teachers**

There's always those teachers that you just kind of wonder about. You know like sometimes you notice they may pick on some kid who is of a certain race, like all the time.  
-Pamela, black and white

If you keep observing in the classrooms you'll notice how some of the black students get treated a little differently...just keep observing.  
-Hampton, black

Sometimes I feel like teachers they think like the black kids are harder to work with... Sometimes teachers don't want to be dealing with the black kids or they don't want to see us...  
-Shantel, black

There was two Caucasian boys that acted up constantly, every day, every day, every day and they did pretty good in her class though. But it was like us, I guess she always yelled at us and we ended up with bad grades.  
-Brandy, black

I think, too with black students, they can tell if you're harboring some sort of racis[m], they can tell. They can tell if you're being fair with the whole group. You know all those things translate and that translates to how they're gonna interact with you....  
-Ms. Armstrong, white teacher

Black students used accusations of racism as a joke and an excuse. However racism was not just a game for them. As the above quotes indicate, their comments also reflected something real: black students *were* negatively judged by teachers, they *were* more likely to be disciplined for behaviors that white students got away with, and they knew it. In turn, sometimes when they said teachers were racist, they were not “jokes” or “excuses.” Students were engaging in critical commentary of the discrimination they saw in their school and of the fact that many of the teachers were, in fact, biased in ways that they were not necessarily aware of or willing to consciously admit.

Most students believed teachers negatively judged black students. They found teachers were particularly hostile towards the styles and performances of black youth that were not aligned with white, middle-class norms. Bianca explained:

I feel like [teachers] always perceive their image, like not necessarily black people but certain black kids. Like if a boy comes in with the sagging pants and the shirts and the hats... I don't care what anybody says you're automatically given the stereotype like, “Oh he's this or he's that”... When class first starts in the beginning of the year people walking in your classroom, “Oh you know she looks nice, she's going to be a good student.” “Oh, he has the baggy pants and the hat and yo-yo,” you know.

In Bianca's experience, teachers often made snap judgments about new students that were based, in large part, on how they dressed, and whether or not they perceived them to “look nice.” Of course, what “looked nice” to an individual teacher was filtered through their own cultural lens and rooted in how they have been socialized around identity and

performance. What Bianca was suggesting was that if a student was a black boy, and presented as such, it was very difficult for a teacher to also see him positively.

Raymond, was a high achieving black student who personally felt teachers had judged him in this way:

I can tell you...right now that teachers do base how to teach a student, how to treat a student, how to look at a student by looking at their behavior, looking at...what they're wearing....It's a big thing...I dress like a black guy...I wear like stuff like that all the time, and I can say that some teachers, not saying all of them or a majority of them, just some...of them, will look at a student...like, "Oh, my God, another one of these kids who are not gonna focus and just gonna be hard for me to get my point across to them."

In my assessment there was nothing about Raymond that looked particularly ominous or particularly urban. While he talked about himself as dressing "like a black guy," he generally just wore large t-shirts, jeans—not particularly baggy—and white sneakers. I never saw him in a hat and I never saw him sag. Moreover, even during this conversation I did not find him to be particularly stylish. That is to say that if Raymond was "another one of these kids," in general black boys could not escape negative valuation.

Teachers agreed that the style of black students often led to negative assessments. According to Ms. Armstrong, "Yeah, if your pants are sagging there's an immediate assumption." Ms. Russo similarly acknowledged the difficulty teachers' had in overcoming racial stereotypes:

I'm sure some teachers do discriminate. You hear people talk and...a lot of teachers, you get stereotypes in your mind and it's very, very difficult as a teacher to get those out of your mind....And as a teacher you... just get certain behaviors and sometimes you...just can't help but relate them to certain groups of people....And a lot of teachers can't let go of that.

Ms. Russo went on to say that the best part of her job was "being proved wrong" by students she assumed would be troublemakers but who "turned out to be like this bright light in my day." She acknowledged that some of her colleagues never got to this point.

Perhaps, not surprisingly, black students and white teachers regularly had conflict with one another. Students believed white students were given preferential treatment by white teachers. Fallon explained:

*Fallon:* How can I say it? Like...half of my black friends they come in late and teacher's like, "Oh, you lost your four points." But when other people come, "Oh

you have a warning.” But that’s their third time being late. Okay, but then we talking in class, you tell us to be quiet, but you see the Caucasian people talking and you don’t say nothing at all....I just think they just got favoritism on some students....some colors.

*Shayla:* Do you think that the teachers have negative opinions of the black students...when they walk in the classroom?

*Fallon:* Heck yeah! You can just tell by...the look on their face how they think, well how they react with that student. Like my friend Nakita she is so loud and obnoxious, ghetto, hood rat thing, teacher just look at her like he puts his head down and just types on his computer....I know he’s thinking like bad things about her in his head.

*Shayla:* Should the teachers do different, anything?

*Fallon:* Yeah, they should do things different...Stop treating the white kids better than we are getting treated.

This scenario was one that highlighted the ways in which student/teacher interactions across race got caught in a negative cycle. As a result, black students began thinking that teachers did not treat them equally and the behaviors of black students reinforced the negative stereotypes teachers already held about them.

Jasmine also said she had personally experienced being punished more harshly than white peers:

Okay me and my friend were walking to class...and the bell rang and we were late and...everybody’s clearing out the hallways and there was a white student walking next to us and she was also late. And...some big white guy, he came up behind us and he was like, “Young ladies where are you supposed to be?” And we’re like, “We’re going to our class, it’s right here.” We were like right outside the door. And the girl she was like, “Well my classroom is just at the end of this hallway,” and he was like, “Okay go on to class.” And then me and my friend started laughing ‘cause he sounded pretty funny....And he was like, “You two come with me.” And we got sent to ISS. And I really just felt like it was because we were black....[My friend] asked him why and he said, “because I saw you at the end of the hallway talking,” but the other girl was at the end of the hallway talking too...

Jasmine did not have a “sense” that teachers were treating her differently. Rather she had a definitive and overt experience in which a white student got away with something she could not.

In addition to differential discipline, students also reported observing differences in how teachers engaged students in class, and ultimately, in how they graded them. For example, Kweis was an energetic student who, at the beginning of this study, was eager to participate in class. I observed him sitting in the front row and frequently raising his hand. However, he felt that one of his teachers was biased:

*Kwesi:* Like I always have questions in her class...and she will always choose the guy next to me. We even did an experiment...I'll raise my hand for like two minutes and he'll just raise his hand randomly. The minute he raised his hand she picked him.

*Shayla:* What made you all decide to do the experiment?

*Kwesi:* Because the people at my table was like, "Wow she just never calls you." I'm like, "I know. My hand's just up here forever"....We all noticed.

*Shayla:* Do you think she likes you?

*Kwesi:* I don't know how she feels about me. Well, I think she doesn't 'cause...I bring my book all the time, but she mixes me up with this guy that doesn't. So the minute like I let somebody see my book...she...says, "Why didn't you bring [your] book?" I was like, "I do have my book." And she was like, "You're always not bringing your book." I said, "my book is right there. You must be confusing me with somebody."

*Shayla:* Who's the guy that doesn't bring his book that she confuses you with?

*Kwesi:* I don't know, but she said, "I'm always confusing you with the guy that doesn't bring his book" and I said oh, okay...I don't even know the guy. He must be in the class before me.

While Kwesi did not use the word "racism" to describe his experience with Ms. Scott, he did believe she confused him with a less responsible student because of his racial identity.

What was particularly interesting about this situation was that Ms. Scott would never have thought of herself as a biased teacher. In fact, she often criticized her colleagues for negatively judging black students. She said, "I get very infuriated. I've had kids that have had problems...and they'll come talk to me, particularly black males...and they've been treated wrong...They've been treated totally unprofessionally I think." She was aware enough of race to see the ways in which black male students were

unconsciously targeted at the school by her colleagues. However, this awareness was not enough to interrupt her own bias. This was not altogether surprising. Teachers who thought they “got race” were also likely to presume they were not at risk of behaving in ways that reproduced the racial hierarchy. As this example reveals, they were not off the hook for treating students inequitably.

Students also believed that teachers graded by race. According to Madison, who was white, “There was one teacher that was actually racist...I guess all the black kids in his class had like C’s and D’s and then all white people had A and B’s...” Black male students were particularly likely to report this. For example, Dwayne reported having difficulties with Ms. Mitchell. While Ms. Mitchell struggled with many of her students, for black students these struggles were seen through the lens of racism:

*Dwayne:* Last year, she gave me, well she gave me an E. I told my mamma to get me out of the classroom. She didn’t want to listen and I’m trying to tell my mamma because Ms. Mitchell to me is racist....But I was like if you pull me out of the classroom I bet you I get a better grade. Once they pulled me out of the classroom I had got in Ms. Gasper-Perez’s [class] and I pulled an A out in her classroom two times in a row.

*Shayla:* So what was it about Ms. Mitchell that you thought was racist?

*Dwayne:* She’s a racist. She just kept picking on me and I kept telling her about herself ‘cause like I’m not going to let a teacher, I know you grown but you’re not going to sit here and keep picking on me...Like she just kept, “Dwayne...move your stuff out the way, get your things out.” I mean like it’s a classroom you need to be telling the whole class not just me.

*Shayla:* You feel like she specifically targeted you?

*Dwayne:* Yes.

*Shayla:* Because you were black?

*Dwayne:* Just like, yeah....She just kept giving me bad grades so I got out of there; and once I got out of there I got an A. So it had to be her.

*Shayla:* Do you think you were doing A work in her class?

*Dwayne:* Not A work, probably B or a C work.

*Shayla:* So how did you get an E?

*Dwayne:* I don't know cause, I ain't 'care about her. I just wanted to get out of her classroom.

Dwayne's experience highlighted what Valenzuela (1999) calls the politics of care. While his biggest complaint was that he believed Ms. Mitchell was "racist," it was his perception that she did not care about him that led to this conclusion. Moreover, he admitted that because he just wanted to "get out" of the class, he did not work as hard as he did in Ms. Gasper-Perez's class. This suggests that just as Valenzuela (1999) found, black students' relationships with their teachers mediated their academic motivation and ultimately their success.

Race was negatively mediating student and teacher relationships even in instances in which white teachers were putting forth significant effort *not* to be racist, and black students were trying very hard to be good students. Chris also struggled with a white female teacher when it came to grading. Although both Dwayne and Chris were black male students, Chris was much more likely to have positive relationships with his teachers. He generally got along with adults and was held in fairly high esteem by many of them. To my knowledge, he had never had disciplinary issues. However, even he believed he had experienced racial discrimination:

Like, the teacher next door, I felt like she didn't like me and a group of other students. One of her favorite students was a group of white kids, but I felt like she's always probably targeting the black males....Like, you know, just like giving them bad grades for no reason and just like not caring at all about them.....It was one presentation that I worked so hard on last year...really hard. I dressed up and everything, you know, I made my point, you know, I read what I had to read very well and I got my point across. I got a C minus....I was like, this is some bull crap....The other students that didn't come dressed at all, you know didn't make the same point as I did, didn't connect it to really any solvents, which we were supposed to do, they got like, B pluses, and A's! I went to talk to her about it and she gave me a B.S. point....She was like, "You didn't make your point very well. You know, I just wasn't understanding." I was like, "If I would have made it any clearer it would be invisible!"

Like Dwayne, Chris felt that his teacher preferred her white students and as a result gave them better grades. Whether this was because the teacher was explicitly racist or because there was a cultural disconnect ultimately did not matter in terms of the outcome. Chris received a failing grade and resented his white teacher. This incident, and the many others that black students relayed to me ultimately created a student narrative in which

white teachers were thought of by black students as racist. While they did not think this was true of all teachers, this sentiment undeniably shaped every aspect of black students' educational experiences.

According to Trevor, the negative feelings between black students and white teachers was not only the result of the interactions and exchanges that happened at Jefferson High School. To the contrary, it stemmed black male's larger distrust of figures of authority rooted in their visceral understandings of structural racism in the country more broadly. He described these dynamics:

*Trevor:* Well for me, all the black males that I know that are my age don't really like teachers that much....A teacher is like a big contradiction....Teachers, but teachers can be very rude...and make you feel like you're smaller than them just because they're a teacher and they're superior.

*Shayla:* And...why is it that you feel like in particular the black people?

*Trevor:* Um, because this is gonna sound really funny, but all the black people that I know...including myself, that I hang with, are all from, not the hood, but from that kind of area. And growing up we were always taught not to like authority...just something you learned is, "you don't like authority, you don't like the police," quote, unquote....So as you get older when you're in school teachers are basically police....So especially for a black male, that's kind of a, that's just an unwritten rule...and then when you have a teacher who does something you don't like, it might just be blown out of proportion....Me personally...I'm not there for the teacher...I'm not there for me to really like the teacher. I'm not there for the teacher to like me. I need to get this work done. So what the teacher does, says, most of the time has no effect on what I'm doing....I'm a good student. In terms of grades I get A's and B's and stuff. But in terms of behavior, I mean I'm a good student, but I don't know. I feel as if I only show respect to people who show respect to me....I don't like when teachers try to belittle me when I do something or try to make me feel as if, you know they're better than me. So let's say if I ask a question and they say, "Oh, you should know that." I don't feel like you should say I should know that. You should just answer my question because obviously there's a reason I'm asking a question....I don't like feeling like I'm stupid.

*Shayla:* So then does that cause conflict with these teachers?

*Trevor:* Most of the time.

Trevor's analysis of student teacher interactions was critically conscious and highly insightful. He connected racism, racial socialization and black male students' daily

experiences in classrooms. His analysis spoke the criminalization of black men in America and the ways in which that criminalization has led to a distrust of authority that is only reinforced when authority figures engage in biased behavior.

Trevor often found himself in verbal altercations with teachers who disrespected him. However, unlike many of his peers, Trevor was a high achieving student. In fact, his G.P.A. was often a shock to teacher who assumed because of his urban style and his “hype” persona that he did not care about school. To the contrary, his mother was getting a Ph.D. and he clearly thought deeply about his own experiences in schools and the larger social structure. Moreover, he was able to recognize how much more productive his educational experience would be if he did not feel targeted because of his race and culture.<sup>49</sup>

Black students were not alone in their observations that they were unfairly targeted by white teachers. White students observed this as well. Logan, who claimed he could do whatever he wanted in this school in Chapter 5, had the following observations of race and discipline at Jefferson:

*Logan:* Black kids I would say get in a lot more trouble than white kids. I would say so, in some classes that I’ve been in. Like the black kids get picked on more for doing wrong stuff. Like a black kid does something wrong and you get yelled at. And then the white kid does the same thing wrong and then he gets like, what are you doing...and like jokingly....

*Shayla:* Are these like wealthy black kids, middle class black kids, poor black kids?

*Logan:* There’s definitely higher end black kids...Just if, they’re watched more...is what I think it is. Just like if you say like...in a store.

Logan was a regular, well-off white student who was well-liked by teachers. He was popular, preppy and most all of his friends were white. His analysis did not stem from his sense of being an ally to his black peers. Rather he was just reporting on what he observed. He frequently witnessed instances in which black students got in trouble for

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<sup>49</sup> Trevor was not unlike the successful young men in Gayles’s (2005) study. Gayles found that these three young men accepted the “utilitarian value of schooling” while also managing to maintain social and cultural connections (p. 259). Their success was neither rooted in a significant connection to teachers, nor in a rejection of blackness, but rather in an acknowledgement that doing well in school was necessary for other life-goals.

things that teachers believed to be funny, joking banter when he did them. This observation revealed the nuanced ways in which behavior was interpreted and framed by white teachers.

Classroom observations supported Logan's findings. Often, middle-class and upper-middle-class students were loud, unmotivated, and likely to congregate in large groups or try to skip class. However, most teachers did not read these behaviors as challenging to their authority or as evidence of students' deficiencies. Instead, teachers largely assumed that "these kids"—these white, middle-class kids from "good" homes—were being silly and bonding with them. They believed that this "banter" was all in good fun. In contrast, when black students said something sassy or rude, white teachers read this as a threat. It was this distinction that many black students were commenting upon when they accused teachers of being racist.

White teachers also believed their colleagues negatively judged black students and, in some cases, feared them. Mr. Martin was the most direct:

You know...we have suburban black kids and yet some of our teachers are terrified of these kids. It's like, "Oh, the black man," and I'm like, they're kids first off. They're from the fricken suburbs you know it's not like they're gang banging, pulling up in their...lowered Chevy...blasting shots out the window... Like they're talking right now, "Oh they just had those black kids go and break in over [in a majority white district] and they were students here." I'm like really? How about [the boy] who graduated two years ago and just got 25 to 30 years in prison? He's a white kid. I don't see you guys saying anything about him...Yeah I think they're scared of them....They are scared...They're not going to say that to you...I, I'm just trying to be as blunt and honest with you as I can.....

Mr. Martin believed that the true nature of teachers' feelings was even more extreme than I had observed. Because I was a black woman it was unlikely a teacher would ever express such sentiments to me. But he believed this was information I needed to know. Not only were students of color being profiled to some degree based on their style, speech and behavior, he believed that teachers genuinely feared their black male students who they assumed were, in fact, "gangsters and gangbangers," even though they lived in Jefferson subdivisions.

It is difficult to determine "truth" of claims that white teachers were racially biased. Perhaps Chris got a low grade on his assignment because his teacher was racist or perhaps it was because he did not do as good of a job as he thought. Perhaps Jasmine and

her friend were sent to ISS because they were black, or perhaps it was because they laughed at the adult reprimanding them. And yet, in many ways the “truth” did not matter. What mattered was that there were so many incidents of this sort at Jefferson—like at most all schools in the country—that black students *felt* they were being targeted, and white teachers suspected they were. Moreover, the data on achievement and discipline suggests that these feelings were connected to larger trends.

In turn, students and teachers at Jefferson were not simply navigating “joking” interactions around race, they were also regularly dealing with “real” racial bias and differential treatment. As a result, almost all cross-racial interactions between students and teachers were filtered through the lens of racism. Salim called this cycle “mutual disrespect”:

*Salim:* Sometimes [teachers will] just like have an attitude with the...black kids... you know there'll be like a mutual disrespect between each other, the teacher and the student.

*Shayla:* A mutual disrespect?...And what's this mutual disrespect look like?

*Salim:* Usually what will happen is the loud kid in the class or the kid that the teacher doesn't like, he'll get in trouble more often 'cause the teacher will put up less with him.

*Shayla:* And what is the student's response to that teacher?

*Salim:* Just keep disrespecting the teacher and then they'll talk about him later.

*Shayla:* So what do you think? As they say, the chicken or the egg?

*Salim:* Sometimes it's a big circle, you know.

Salim's observations were astute. There was a cycle of interaction between white teachers and their black students in which race seemed to mediate the outcomes.

When it comes to issues of identity it is impossible not to have biases of some sort. We live in a world in which we are constantly bombarded with images of those who are different from us. There is no way that these images do not shape our perceptions, ideologies and behavior. In turn, it was not surprising that teachers formed opinions about students. The problem was that too few of them were pushing themselves to challenge their own stereotypes or move beyond their own biases. In Delpit's (2006) book *Other*

*People's Children* she writes that school officials often “look at ‘other people’s children (black and low-income students) and see damaged and dangerous caricatures of the vulnerable and impressionable beings before them” (p. xxiii). As a result, as Mr. Wade pointed out, “there’s a lot of prejudice here in this building,” and students were aware of it.

### **III. IT’S NOT ABOUT RACE: HOW TEACHERS USE COLORBLIND FRAMES TO AVOID TALKING ABOUT RACE**

I have often said that white people will do *anything* not to talk about their race and to avoid our responsibilities to take apart these systems that keep us primary.  
-Frances Kendall, *Understanding Whiteness*, p. 48

We often assume that political activism requires an explanation, while inactivity is a normal state of affairs.  
But it can be as difficult to ignore a problem as to try to solve it.  
-Nina Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics*, p. 6

Teachers at Jefferson were having hyper-racial interactions with their students. However, they almost never talked to students about race in ways that were anything other than joking. Moreover, they did not interrupt the problematic student interactions happening across race and often, unknowingly, perpetrated bias. Although teachers’ dealt with race in predictable ways on the ground they held very different racial ideologies. Some thought of themselves as completely “colorblind,” while others claimed to be color-conscious. However, the culture of fear and avoidance was so strong that all teachers felt paralyzed when it came to talking about race—even those who thought of themselves as racially conscious.

This section discusses the various ways in which both color-blind and color-conscious teachers at Jefferson used colorblind frames to avoid talking about race and illuminates the reality that when it comes to taking action around issues of race, “consciousness” is not enough.

#### **A. Teachers’ Racial Ideologies**

Teachers held three predominant racial ideologies—colorblindness, color-consciousness, and color-confusion. Most teachers were not one or the other. Instead, racial consciousness was a messy endeavor. Some teachers simultaneously espoused

colorblind ideologies while talking about the specific challenges faced by students from various racial or economic groups. Similarly, racially conscious teachers were often unable to apply their intellectual understanding of inequality to their daily practice or interactions with students of color. As a result, almost all of the adults at Jefferson played a role in maintaining a culture of silence and avoidance when it came to issues of race.

### 1. “Kids are Kids”: Colorblind Teachers

First of all one thing about me that I should tell you, honestly when a kid walks in a room I don't notice their color, I really don't. I don't pay attention to that, I don't pay attention to their clothes, I don't pay attention to how their hair looks....It doesn't matter to me. It really doesn't.  
-Ms. Mendenhall, white female teacher

Many of the teachers at Jefferson High School claimed to be colorblind. Like Ms. Mendenhall, they said that when it came to their students, they did not *see* race and did not believe students' racial backgrounds mattered for their teaching practice. Ms. Hogan was one of these teachers. She had worked at Jefferson for almost 30 years during which the numbers of students of color had doubled. Nonetheless, Ms. Hogan did not believe that these changes were particularly noteworthy:

To me kids are kids. You know...a fifteen year old is a fifteen year old is a fifteen year old, whether it's 1985 or 2009....Doesn't matter what their physicality looks like...cause they can so surprise you....I've got a kid back there with all the piercings and every goofy looking thing and he's one of my sharper kids so you really can't judge a book by its cover....Now behaviorally I can tell. The kids have this defense mechanisms and they have their way of avoiding doing work....After 27 years you can spot that after the 1st week of school you know who's going to have a heck of a time....

In addition to being ideologically colorblind, Ms. Hogan avoided using any kind of racial language to describe students. Instead, when giving examples of the diversity of her students she talked about piercings. While she did not explicitly connect “behavior” to “race,” as noted in previous chapters students of color and low-income were more likely to be thought of as poorly behaved and were more likely to be suspended and expelled. In turn, Ms. Hogan's colorblindness obscured the ways in which racial group membership mediated academic experiences.

Colorblind teachers believed that their students should be colorblind as well. While making copies in the teachers' lounge one day, Ms. Wilson relayed a story to me

in which she was covering for an absent colleague. A substitute was on their way but was running late. While letting the students in the classroom a black girl asked Ms. Wilson if their sub was black. Ms. Wilson responded, “Why does that matter?” Shaking her head incredulously Ms. Wilson said this young lady’s fallacy was indicative of the work teachers needed to do to assist students in moving beyond race.

The “race negative” approach taken by Wilson, in which any mention of race was inherently perceived as a problem, was common among colorblind teachers. They assumed that raising race in any way was racist. Colorblind teachers had no notion of the existence of a healthy racial consciousness. Moreover, they failed to recognize the ways in which racial representation mattered—especially for students who rarely saw themselves in the faces of those who taught them. At Jefferson, over 90% of teachers were white. It was very likely that the young lady Wilson spoke of had never had a black teacher. In my own time at the school I witnessed the ways in which black students longed for connections with black adults. Like the black staff in Chapter 3 who spoke of being “stretched so thin with (black) students coming to me...with them needing to be around me, needing to see my face...” black students had actively sought me out in my time at Jefferson. While I prided myself on having very positive relationships with students from all backgrounds, it was clear to me that for the black students I symbolized something special. Given this social context, it was no surprise that a black student would wonder if perhaps she would see a face that looked more like hers standing in the front of the classroom.

The major failure of colorblindness was that it served to conceal the failures of the school to respond to the needs of all students. In so doing, colorblindness created a system in which those students who dared *notice* these failures were ultimately framed as the problem. Howard’s (2006) book *We Can’t Teach What We Don’t Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools* investigates the struggles of white teachers to recognize race and the challenges that colorblindness presents to these efforts:

For these people, the mere existence of the differences causes discomfort and must be ignored or denied. Of course, the underlying assumption is that human difference in and of itself is a problem. Colorblindness grows from a dominance-oriented perspective. “We are all the same” translates as “We are all like me.” (p. 57)

This desire to presume that “we are all the same” and thus deny the different experience of a black student in a school with all white teachers was clear in Ms. Wilson’s comments. Ladson-Billings (1994) suggests that “sameness” not only overlooks students’ unique and diverse experiences, it also hinders the ability of teachers to do their job:

The passion for equality in the American ethos has many teachers (and others) equating equality with sameness....The notion of equity as sameness only makes sense when all students *are* exactly the same....If teachers pretend not to see students’ racial and ethnic differences, they really do not see the students at all and are limited in their ability to meet their educational needs. (p. 33)

By being blind to race, colorblind teachers were also blind to racial inequality. Pollock (2004) writes that, “all Americans, every day, *are* reinforcing racial distinctions and racialized thinking by using racial labels; but we are also reinforcing racial inequality by refusing to use them” (p. 4). Being “blind” to difference made teachers “blind” to solutions that would help bridge the gap between those students who were racially and economically marginalized and those who were not.

## 2. Color-conscious Teachers

We’re not in a post racial society...they’re full of crap, they’re full of crap if they say that, and they know they are.  
-Mr. Martin

...It is impossible to be colorblind in a world as color-conscious as ours.  
-Guinier and Torres, *The Miner’s Canary*, p. 42

Not all teachers at Jefferson thought of themselves as “colorblind.” Many teachers were racially conscious and were honest about their struggles to navigate race.<sup>50</sup> They were critical of their colleagues claims that it was possible to be blind to race. Perhaps not surprisingly, almost all of the color-conscious teacher had had significant personal exposure to racial diversity through familial relations, close friendships, and world travels. Mr. Edwards was one of these teachers. He talked openly about himself as privileged by his race and gender. This awareness was something most of his colleagues lacked:

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<sup>50</sup> For more on the experiences of racially conscious and anti-racist white teachers see: Julie Landsman (2001) *A White Teacher Talks about Race*, Landsman and Lewis (2006) *White Teachers, Diverse Classrooms*, Gary Howard (2006) *We Can’t teach What We Don’t Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools*, Mica Pollock ed. (2008) *Everyday Anti-Racism: Getting Real about Race in Schools*.

I don't think other teachers for the most part are aware of [white privilege]. Cause I always hear, "Oh well, I'm colorblind," but you know, maybe that's not such a good thing....Because that's going to help you deal with students of color, and students who aren't straight, and students who aren't the same sex as you— understanding that this is not...a meritocracy. We pay lip service to it, but no, it is strictly race and class based. If that should be broken, this is the perfect place to do it, school.

Mr. Sallee was similarly able to talk about structural inequality. While he ideally envisioned a world in which, "like Haile Selassie's comment, you know, a color of a man's skin is of no more importance than the color of a man's eyes," he did not believe colorblindness was a useful ideological position given the present reality. "Saying, 'Oh race doesn't matter,' that's just plain ignorant..." he said. "Are you blind?... Yeah, that's foolish." Nonetheless, he understood why so many of his colleagues took this position. "I certainly understand," he said. "It's a tough job. There's a lot going on. Anything you can do to simplify it is a good thing." Both Mr. Edwards and Mr. Sallee recognized that education could not be a "one size fits all model." Moreover, both had enough personal experience and intellectual knowledge to identify connections between historical discrimination, racial inequality, and the experiences of their students. In this way, they were very different than their colorblind colleagues.

Color-conscious teachers recognized that fighting against racism was a constant battle. "I think everybody has [racism] in them somehow," Ms. Kennedy said. "And it's not necessarily against a whole race but I think everybody has it in them to a certain degree cause it's been for hundreds of years in our society....Somebody has a relative that's overtly racist. Sometimes something is happening and you just have that thought. Everybody's got it and it's just a matter of if you're...you don't act on it. You don't make ignorant comments." For Ms. Kennedy, color-consciousness was a willful and intentional act. She believed it was disingenuous for teachers to claim that they never had these preconceived notions, if for no other reason than because they were a part of the fabric of hundreds of years of racial history, and because so many white teachers, like white students, were dealing with racism in their own families and communities.

Ms. Gorski agreed that it took active and conscious work not to be racist. Her history in a very racist family and racially segregated community, along with her own ostracized ethnic identity, led her toward racial consciousness. It was her heightened

awareness of race as “negative,” her memories of the first time she saw a black person, her acknowledgement of how certain groups were “othered” within her own community, that led her down a very different path than the majority of her family members. Ms. Gorski found that a number of her peers would say things like:

“Oh I’m not racist, or something,” you know. And like I said...it’s an effort to not be racist....The racism is so strong in this country. I mean, they did everything but call Obama the N-word....I don’t watch TV, but I do scan every once in a while....So I go on the country music channel, okay. Well there’s a black artist on there....so, you know, all the images of the music videos are just images, right? But here they go. They have to have the confederate flag in the background with a bunch of Asian kids. And its like, what are you doing. What are you saying here?

Outside of school Ms. Gorski was attentive to the ways in which race was formatted in the media (Shryock, 2004). It was because of this consciousness that she was able to think critically about race within Jefferson walls. In particular, she was critical of how race mediated decisions about special education.<sup>51</sup>

In one of the earliest conversations I had with Ms. Gorski she said she was bothered by the overrepresentation of black students in special education. In the following exchange she explains her observations and her concern that this was no accident:

*Ms. Gorski:* They’re definitely more black. Yeah.

*Shayla:* Why do you think that is?

*Ms. Gorski:* Because they’re racist.

*Shayla:* Really? And on whose part?

*Ms. Gorski:* Well it’s racism on the part of the testing and stuff. I mean I had, I had a student in the back of my cognitively impaired class, they were twins—a black girl and her brother. She was in the back of the classroom reading a paperback book....and I’m going, cognitively impaired, really precludes your ability to read, especially a paperback book....She graduated actually with a 3.5. And the whole time I’m thinking, why was she in there?...It was almost as if she was there to take care of her brother....Since her brother was labeled as special ed then...she is. And then so why did that happen?...But then I even went further and

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<sup>51</sup> Many studies have found that African American boys are especially likely to be diagnosed with a learning disability and placed in special education (Noguera, 2003, Noguera, 2003, O’Connor & Fernandez, 2006).

said, well, was her brother even cognitively impaired? And, no...I think it's allowed.

Ms. Gorski was one of the few teachers asking these kinds of questions at Jefferson. She believed that most of her colleagues were unwilling or unable to give attention to issues of race and discrimination.

### **3. “Aren’t We Supposed to Be Colorblind?”: Color-Confused**

A final group of teachers were those I think of as “color-confused.” They were torn between the two poles of colorblindness and color-consciousness. This group was willing to acknowledge that they “saw” race. However they were unsure if this was a good thing. Color-confused teachers had been taught to be colorblind and struggled to keep up with what seemed to them to be the latest political fad in race relations. Ms. Wenzell was a good example. She was a racially conscious white teacher who had grown up in a low-income, majority black community. She connected well with black students and adults and thought of herself as one of the few white teachers at the school who really understood black culture and had the experience to back it up. Nonetheless, she was on more than one occasion at a loss when it came to how she should talk about race:

I think that there's a little too much stress on, is it colorblindness? Or should...no...people talk about you shouldn't be colorblind you should be color-conscious....I think it's another PC bunch of crap. If you say you're colorblind, that you'd like people to understand you don't...judge people...then you're wrong because you shouldn't be colorblind...can I win please, somewhere?

Ms. Wenzell's feeling that when it came to talking about race she could not win, was astute. The reality is that meaning making around race is a complex and often contradictory endeavor. This was especially difficult in light of the fact that Jefferson teachers had grown up during a time when they were taught that “colorblindness” was the next step in racial progress. As a result they longed to be colorblind all while realizing they were not, and knowing somewhere deep down that they were not supposed to be.

Ms. Stinnett's experience was an illuminating example of the internal battle of the color-confused:

*Ms. Stinnett:* Like color wasn't an issue in my family. We helped a family move from Zimbabwe...who lived with us. I consider her my foster sister.... My grandparents marched in Washington. We have really liberal values. I mean my

parents said there is nobody that I could bring home that would shock them except a Republican....I was educated in a way that we weren't supposed to see color....You know everybody's supposed to be treated the same way.

*Shayla:* Would you describe yourself as colorblind?

*Ms. Stinnett:* I would not describe myself as colorblind. I wish I was in a lot of ways...

*Shayla:* Would you describe yourself as color conscious?

*Ms. Stinnett:* I think that's my issue. I'm color conscious and I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing....I would never say if I was describing a person across the room that I wanted you to notice, I would tell you what their hair color was. I would tell you what they're wearing. I would tell you what they were doing all before my last thing that I would tell you is what color they are....For me to point out what color somebody was...I think it is an issue. I don't think my friends would ever, they would be like, "Why are you telling me they're black?" And I would be like, "I'm just trying to point them out to you." They would be shocked....It's considered unacceptable.

*Shayla:* Do you think it's good that it's unacceptable?

*Ms. Stinnett:* I don't know. I think it's unacceptable because I would never tell you if I was describing a person and they were the same color as I was...I would never say, "that white person over there."

Rather than considering the possibility that white people should have more racial consciousness Ms. Stinnett believed she should not notice the race of non-white people. As these examples reveal, racial consciousness was a complicated endeavor. Many teachers claimed not to "see" race and others, who did, wondered if they should. Moreover, those who were racially conscious admitted the continual effort it took to move beyond their own bias. The next section reveals that it not only took significant effort not to be explicitly racist, as Ms. Gorski observed, it also took work not to fall back on colorblindness.

## **B. Colorblind Frames of the Blind, Conscious and Confused: Why and How Teachers Don't Talk About Race**

Many scholars and practitioners suggest one of the most ideal ways to improve white teachers' effectiveness with students of color is to make them more racially

conscious (Dessel, 2010; Howard, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1994). However, my work finds that while teachers may have scored very differently on a survey measure of racial consciousness, when it came to translating this awareness to explanations of racial disparities within their school, they were very similar. “Consciousness” was not enough to overcome fear, social stigma, and the dominant narrative of colorblindness.

A number of ethnographers have found that within schools race is silenced. Pollock (2004) talks about this tendency using the term “colormute.” Ogbu (2003) talks about it as the “code of silence.” In her study of why people avoid engaging in politics, Nina Eliasoph (1998) finds that while many of her informants “did not just think everything was fine as it was...there were too few contexts in which they could openly discuss their discontent” (p. 7). Even those who openly talked about political issues “backstage” (Shryock, 2004) were unlikely to do so in public settings, like schools, in large part because of a lack of efficacy and lack of comfort. When it came to issues of race, people were particularly hesitant because they worried that they were breaking a national taboo and perhaps indicting themselves as racists. Moreover, they did not believe much could be done about racism. Jefferson staff similarly avoided politics and muted race.

How was it possible that in a school where many teachers were conscious of race, and in which students and teachers were having interactions that were highly racialized, race was still silenced, avoided, and ignored? What were the mechanisms by which this happened? Interestingly, although many teachers did not think of themselves as “colorblind,” they all invoked colorblind frames. In *Racism without Racists*, Bonilla-Silva (2010) writes, the irony, and the power, of colorblindness lies in the fact that “...whites with differing levels of sympathy toward minorities resort to the *same* frames when constructing their accounts of racial matters” (p. 30). This individual level avoidance, combined with lack of intuitional support, effectively pushed race to the back burner.

In particular, Bonilla-Silva notes four frames,<sup>52</sup> used in concert like building blocks, that make up the ideology of colorblindness or what he calls “racism lite”—

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<sup>52</sup> Goffman (1974) defines frames as serving to interpret, organize, and make meaning of everyday occurrences and experiences.

abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization.<sup>53</sup> These frames have allowed for the perpetuation of an inequitable racial structure through by seemingly non-racial mechanisms.

Teachers at Jefferson used similar frames, as well as additional ones. They *willfully* ignored anything racial. They *conflated* class, culture and race. They *naturalized* racial segregation. And they *minimized* continuing racial conflicts. Combined, these frames allowed white teachers to construct the “race problem” as the failure of students of color who were “loud,” “obnoxious,” and “poor,” and who kept bringing up race when it was no longer an issue, and failed to challenge the status quo of inequitable racial hierarchies (Guinier & Torres, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

### **1. See No Evil, Hear No Evil: The Blinding Nature of Willful Ignorance**

The first frame that teachers used in making sense of race at Jefferson was that of willful ignorance. While teachers may or may not have noticed “race,” they didn’t notice racial *problems*. When it came to achievement gaps, differential discipline, and negative student interactions across race, teachers heard nothing and saw nothing.

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<sup>53</sup> The frame of abstract liberalism allows for whites to make claims about such liberal goals as “equal opportunity” or “education for all” without enacting any policies or practices that would achieve such a goal. As we saw in Chapter 3, by adopting this frame, administrators could advocate for “diversity” while failing to do anything concrete to create a more diverse staff or a more socially just and inclusive school. Moreover, colorblindness allows for these two approaches to co-exist without seeming contradictory. Through abstract liberalism “...whites can appear ‘reasonable’ and even ‘moral’ while opposing almost all practical approaches to dealing with de facto racial inequality” (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, p. 28). For example, administrators could talk about wanting to serve *all* students and annually fail to apply for the Title I funds that would give them the resources to do so.

Naturalization justifies racial divisions and segregation as human nature, rather than a reflection of a racial structure that inherently privileges and oppresses. In this frame events are thought to be “undirected” and “unguided.” According to Goffman (1974), “such unguided events are ones understood to be due totally, from start to finish, to ‘natural’ determinants. It is seen that no willful agency causally and intentionally interferes, that no actor continuously guides the outcome” (p. 22). Teachers largely used this frame to make sense of segregated student cafeterias and social groupings. By claiming these phenomena were “natural” they were able to ignore the ways in which they were racialized.

The frame of cultural racism blames the continuation of racial inequality on the cultural and behavioral deficiencies of people of color. A rebirth of the “culture of poverty” thesis (Harvey & Reed, 1996, O. Lewis, 1959), this frame suggests that the reason why black students struggle academically and behaviorally is because they come from homes in which their parents do not value education, or because they are culturally pre-disposed to unacceptable behavior.

And finally, minimization is the practice by which white people claim that improvements in race relations mean that race is no longer an issue. Because colorblind white people perceive things to be better than they used to be, any claims about continuing legacies of racism by people of color can be written off as “playing the race card” or being “hyper sensitive.”

### **a. Willfully Ignoring Gaps in Achievement and Discipline**

Although students of color at Jefferson graduated at higher rates, than their white counter parts, like most schools in the country, they underperformed on all standardized measures. Moreover, students of color were underrepresented in AP courses and in the National Honor Society. However, most teachers claimed to have little knowledge of these trends. When most teachers were asked whether or not there was an achievement gap they said they had no idea. A number of teachers offered to “go get their grade books” and take a look during our conversation, or quickly began scanning their students to answer the question more accurately. As Ms. Palmer put it “I don’t know...I like don’t even pay attention to that...I would probably have to sit there and look at like individual kids and really think about that.” In part, the problem was “nobody comes to us and says, ‘So here’s your case load it’s disadvantaged in this sense or you’re getting more of this population,’ ...and I mean maybe I should, maybe some people pay attention to it... I just look at these kids, and I’m like, all right, so what do they need?”

Chapter 3 noted the failure of upper-level administration to provide teachers with accurate, disaggregated data about students. In turn, teachers’ claim that they were not aware of disparities was not altogether inaccurate. However, the frame of willful ignorance was not simply about a failure to provide information from the top down. It was about turning a blind eye to localized manifestations of these gaps. In other words, teachers who utilized this frame had no sense of racialized trends in achievement and discipline within *their own* classrooms.

Other teachers admitted that they were purposefully blind to these disparities because they worried that knowing this information might *increase* their own personal biases. As Mr. Green described:

[M]aybe I’m intentionally oblivious because I don’t care, I mean I don’t care who walks through the door...They’re all unique, I hate to make sweeping generalizations...I don’t want to sound...oblivious, you know, somebody that doesn’t care, but like I said I haven’t really thought about it that much because I don’t want to have those like preconceptions. I rather just deal with people.

For Mr. Green, noticing racial differences and “treating people equally” could not co-exist. His claim that he wanted to “just deal with people” suggested that people from all groups had equal opportunities at Jefferson. However, all of the data suggested otherwise.

In turn, by choosing to only deal with “people” Mr. Green was intentionally letting himself off the hook for having to address the unique needs of various subgroups of students. In this way, willful ignorance was a kind of “abstract liberalism” which holds as a prerequisite the assumption of equal opportunity and “necessitates ignoring the fact that people of color are *severely* underrepresented in most good jobs, schools, and universities” among other things (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, p. 28).

Other teachers were explicit about their concern that asking questions about race and achievement or discipline was an inherently racist endeavor. Mr. Sallee was someone who thought a lot about issues of race and class, had family members of color, and had independently tracked achievement in this classroom by subgroup. He knew that there were disparities. “I was curious if there was....” he said. Framing his investigation as one of “curiosity” rather than socially justice teaching, suggested that even Mr. Sallee, a racially conscious teacher, worried about the implications of his investigation. He explained:

You know. I mean if you’re a black teacher and you ask that question, but if you’re a white teacher and you say, “Gee, are blacks not doing as well?” Then automatically there’s some suspicion and you’re being racist... They don’t want to talk about the issues of race cause you’re afraid to be perceived as racist. So then you go, “We don’t notice any difference. No they’re all the same.”

Mr. Sallee illuminated the tensions between color-consciousness and racism. He clarified the fact that willful ignorance was rooted not only in teachers’ obliviousness to the challenges and structures of the actual world, but also in their concern that by paying attention to race they might be made or revealed to be racist.

Finally, teachers were also unsure of what would come from acknowledging racial disparities. For example, when asked if there was an achievement gap Ms. Mendenhall said:

I really don’t, I don’t know....I probably do want to know, but I guess I don’t want to know because it doesn’t matter to me. My job’s not going to change any whether or not there is one. I’m not going to do anything different because I don’t look at that when I’m teaching.

Many teachers shared this sentiment. They believed themselves to already be providing opportunities for young people to learn and grow to the best of their abilities. If the data suggested that their efforts were not effective with some groups of students this would

server only to make them feel bad. They could not actually conceptualize a way in which it might improve their teaching.

### **b. “In My Own Little World”: Willfully Ignoring Hyper-Racialized Student Interactions**

The second way in which willful ignorance was utilized was in making sense of the hyper-racialized interactions of students. As Chapters 4 and 5 revealed, students at Jefferson frequently engaged in cross-racial interactions in which race was invoked overtly and in ways that served to reinscribe bias and hierarchy. Nonetheless, as seen in this chapter, most teachers claimed to have no awareness of these interactions and exchanges. In fact, when asked about racial jokes, racial slurs, racial performance, and physical racial intimidation a surprising number of teachers said that our conversation was the first they had heard of any such issues. Those who admitted they did witness things like students self segregating, or that they occasionally heard a racially tinged joke, said these incidents were anomalies in an otherwise racially tolerant school. As Ms. Wenzell put it, “I don’t see a lot of racial hatred or anything like that. I think that this is, it’s...in my opinion, very healthy around here....” Overall teachers said that they “don’t feel racial tension” and don’t see “any blatant...racial issues between students.” Mr. Green explained this disconnect between the findings in Chapters 4 and 5, and the ignorance of teachers:

With my eyes in my own little world down here, I don’t see like inflammatory racial things. Now that’s with my eyes in my little world down here. I don’t see a lot of bullying, but according to the school social worker and the school psychologist, we have a bullying problem. I’m glad I don’t see it with my own eyes, but...you know there are a lot of things you don’t see. I mean it’s always there. It’s just lurking under the, you know, just out of sight.

Although Mr. Green admitted that these issues were always bubbling just beneath the surface, he not only failed to see them, just as he failed to see differences in achievement and discipline by race, he was actually relieved that he did not. If he had noticed “bullying” and “inflammatory racial things” he would have had to do something about it. It was much easier not to see these things.

Many teachers also claimed to have no sense of the racial segregation of the cafeterias. As Ms. Scott explained, “I don’t even pay attention cause I just don’t register

stuff like that.” While it was true that most teachers did not frequent the student cafeterias, and did not walk by both of them with any regularity, conversation about the “white” and “black” cafeterias was explicit and regular among students. Virtually, every student talked to during the two years of this study brought up this divide, usually independently. If teachers were paying attention at all to how students talked about race it would have been very difficult for them to have no sense of the segregation of cafeterias. Moreover, as Chapter 4 noted, the year before this study began there had been efforts at the administrative level to integrate the cafeterias by assigning students to certain lunchrooms. In turn, teachers had multiple opportunities to know what was happening at lunchtime. Unfortunately, they also willfully ignored these trends.

The failure of teachers to notice hyper-racialized interactions between students was in some part based on lack of exposure and in other part willful ignorance. In other words, teachers were not often a part of student conversations that would have made these exchanges obvious, but they also engaged in a certain level of avoidance, second-guessing, and denial that made it more difficult for them to see what was really happening. They happily did not hear what students said, misheard their comments, or failed to pay attention to them because doing otherwise would require more effort and discomfort on their part. Rather than seeking out moments of student bullying and discrimination as opportunities for teaching, learning, and redirection, teachers easily let students—and themselves—off the hook.

## **2. Conflation**

The second way in which teachers enacted colorblind approaches to making sense of race, was through conflation. While teachers were not comfortable talking about race, they were comfortable talking about *class* and *culture* and relied upon them to make sense of racial disparities. Like the respondents in Ogbu’s (2003) study, white teachers assumed that the struggles they had with black students were based on their socioeconomic status and/or the kinds of homes these young people came from. Unfortunately, teachers did not use class and culture as a way of further complicating the story of race, rather they used it as a means of ignoring and dismissing its relevance.

## **a. Identity Wars: The Blinding Nature of Class**

We use euphemisms, code words: “welfare problem,” “poverty problem,” “crime problem,” assuming these mean something other than what they are—a back-handed way of talking about what we believe is a “race problem.”

-Julie Landsman, *A White Teacher Talks about Race*, 2001, xi

Teachers used class to avoid talking about race in four ways. They used class as a proxy for race, arguing that the real issues they faced were not racial; they argued that all of the black kids were poor; they argued that class was a more complex explanation for disparity; and they talked about class instead of race because it was easier for them.

### **i. It’s Not Race, It’s Class: Class as a Proxy for Race**

Many teachers mobilized “class” to subvert race. Teachers in this tradition primarily denied the possibility that race was a relevant factor when considering things like achievement, behavior, and segregation. When asked about the existence of an achievement gap in the school Ms. Meguschar said, “I see an achievement gap more so between SES than I do race, across the board. I see my higher SES whether they’re white, black, Asian, mixed...doing better for the most part than my lower SES. I see that as a bigger achievement gap than the race.” While there was an economic achievement gap at the school, there was also a very significant racial one that she was not able to acknowledge.

Ms. Armstrong also relied upon class to explain differential achievement—falling into the trap of “identity picking”:

I really think socioeconomics in a lot of ways can supersede the race issue. I think the socioeconomic is really what we should be focused on as a school, as a community, as a nation....The media or whoever wants you to focus on the race, but really it’s...the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer and the middle class are going away. And if we don’t have any of that we’re all the same, man. We’re all poor.

In many ways, Ms. Armstrong’s comments indicated an awareness of the current political and economic climate in which the ramification of failing to develop a class-consciousness in the U.S. was becoming more and more apparent. However, she failed to acknowledge that being black and poor was qualitatively different than being white and poor (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995).

Ms. Dunlap also thought of herself as racially conscious, in large part because her family had been active in the Civil Rights Movement. However, she could not see the ways in which race mattered in her classroom:

I think the biggest problem is the economic....You know a young black man whose father and mother are M.D.s or Ph.D.s...he may [have] some problems if he's at the mall or...when he's driving, but achievement wise... you're not going to be able to detect color from his test scores or his performances in a classroom.

Although Ms. Dunlap acknowledged that “out there” in the world, people were discriminatory, she was unable and unwilling to deal with the ways in which middle-class black students have been repeatedly shown to underperform on standardized tests when compared to middle-class white students (Ogbu, 2003).

Teachers similarly used class as a proxy to explain away racial segregation among students. For example, Mr. McPhee argued:

The deep root of [segregation] is socioeconomic. Where people live. Cause you have your group or clique if you will from the trailer park...verses your small subdivisions, and they're not in close proximity that much...So you have people of lower income, middle income, and higher income kind of hanging out together....I think that is the bigger issue to address than color.

Mr. McPhee was accurate in his assumption that class facilitated social divisions between students. However socioeconomic status was not the only divider, nor was it the most prominent. In fact, race ultimately determined *where* low-income students lived. As noted in Chapter 2, the trailer parks were almost all white and the apartments in the district were almost all black. Class did not explain these divisions. Even in racially mixed subdivisions, students from different racial backgrounds who lived next door to each other were not particularly likely to hang out in racially integrated groups.

In turn, teachers who adopted class as a proxy were unable to see the ways in which class and race intersected. For them these identities were not additive, rather class was a stand-in for race. Once class was taken into account, race was no longer an issue to be contended with.

## **ii. All the Black Kids are Poor: Race as a Proxy for Class**

These white teachers think just because these kids are black, they're poor! And they're not! Look at their clothes! Somebody is taking *good* care of them. They are not poor. But to these teachers they all look the same.

Other teachers used class and race as synonyms. These teachers not only explained away differences they witnessed by claiming that the real issue was one of class, they also made comments that suggested that all black students were poor—a claim that as Chapter 2 explained, simply was not the case. Ms. Stinnett was a good example of this. She said that when it comes to achievement, “I have found that it’s more socioeconomic.” However, she continued, “I think we have a larger black population that is socioeconomically low than we do a white population.” Teachers in this tradition admitted that race was a point of consideration, but only insofar as it said something about class position. In the following exchange, I pressed Ms. Stinnett to think about her views of the school demographics:

*Shayla:* The rumor I had heard about this school was a lot of the poor kids are rural white kids, and a lot of the black kids are middle-class.

*Ms. Stinnett:* I don’t know if I really believe that now, especially since we are a school of choice....[So] I don’t really think that’s true. I think it used to be true. I think that used to be true for sure. I don’t think it has been in the last four years or so.

*Shayla:* When did the school of choice thing start?

*Ms. Stinnett:* Two years ago....But we definitely had people moving into this district or saying I live with aunt so and so to go this school.

The accuracy of Ms. Stineett’s analysis remains uncertain in large part because information about whether or not a significant number of black students lived with extended family was not available. However, even if this had been the case, the parents who had the foresight and resources to move their children to a school they perceived to be “better”—either through choice options or by using an address of a family member—were not the *most* disadvantaged. Rather these were parents who were invested in their children’s education, who were willing to go out of their way to provide better academic opportunities,<sup>54</sup> and who had a middle-class support network in Jefferson.

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<sup>54</sup> Jefferson did not provide any kind of transportation beyond the district and was not on the public bus line. In turn, if students were coming in from outside of the district parents were having to drive them.

### iii. Class as a More Complex Explanation

I've had squirrely kids of every description. Um that's my favorite word. Like you know I have so many squirrels in this class and so many squirrels in that class. If there was a link to race I would...I think I would be looking one step further and see if that's actually more socioeconomic status.  
-Ms. Ellis, white teacher

A number of teachers considered themselves to be engaging in deeper and more critical analyses of social phenomena by talking about class instead of race. Mr. Sallee explained achievement and behavioral differences in the following way:

*Mr. Sallee:* I think it's [race] a pretty convenient thing. I think you'd find a lot more socio-economic issues there than a racial one. In this area...everyone's like, dude, blacks are poor. Cause the City's poor! It's not that the blacks are poor. It's that the City's poor. And they didn't, they were the ones, the whites with the money moved out...

*Shayla:* So are the people who live here poor?

*Mr. Sallee:* Somewhat. Not always....We have a really range in that regard I think.... There's a little bunch of kids that's just loud and just causing trouble. It's a little more complex than that. I don't think it's a desire to be racial. I think it's a desire to simplify a situation. So you over simplify it. It's going to be easy to say it's those black kids who are getting out of hand. No it's not. It's a bunch of kids who haven't been shown another way, who maybe at home don't have a lot of money or don't have any jobs or something....I mean, if you could look at two people and try and look at the reasons behind what they're doing instead of look at the simple easy one. "Oh, one was black and one was white." That's easy, right? That's an oversimplification.

While Mr. Sallee believed that relying upon race was an over simplification, he did not think relying upon class was. Instead, understanding class was a more complex analysis to his mind. Interestingly, this held true even as he used race as a vehicle for talking about class. Like other teachers, he had contradictory ideas about the ways in which race and class intersected. On the one hand he did not want to admit that race mattered. On the other he talked about the students who were "loud and just causing trouble" as those who were not only black but were also likely from bad homes. Falling back on a kind of cultural racism, he negatively judged these performances, but believed them to be a result of the fact that these "poor" (black) kids simply had not "been shown another way." Interestingly his analysis of white flight and concentrated urban poverty did not help his argument because it only served to reinforce that class and race were often very closely

linked. In other words, while arguing that the city residents were not necessarily black, they were simply poor, he had to acknowledge the racially based flight out of the city made possible by the fact that wealth was, in fact, racialized.

#### **iv. Class as an Easier Explanation**

Another segment of teachers used class not because they believed it to provide a more nuanced explanation, but because it was easier for them to talk about. Ms. McWilliams was a good example. She admitted that there was a national achievement gap based on race, and even acknowledged that Jefferson followed these trends. However, she simply could not bring herself to discuss this at any length, and so once again fell back on the narrative of “class” to do the job for her:

Every time we're shown our school wide statistics, yes. That is true. And when I look at what happens inside my classroom, I haven't...looked at the racial breakdown. I just look at, okay, I know how hard you work, and I know what grade...and it never really is anything that I have sorted out, but if I had to guess, let me think about this for my classes....I have a lot of kids who are in special ed, who come from poor families, black and white. And then I have kids coming from single parents, poorer families who are absent a lot, black and white. And those are the kids that struggle. And it isn't so much about the color of their skin. But I would guess that probably, we fit into the national average.

On the one hand Ms. McWilliams knew Jefferson students fit into “the national average” when it came to race and achievement. And yet she still talked about special education, single-parent homes, and poor families as the issue—issues which she disconnected from race by continually saying that this applied to students “black and white.” In turn, she ultimately failed to explain the racial achievement gap, even if she did provide some insight into the economic one.

#### **v. Some Thoughts on Why the Class-blind Rely on Class**

Ironically, although teacher claimed that class was the real determinant of how well students did in school, they also claimed to be class-blind. When asked directly about class or when pushed to explore which students were low-achievers because of their class background, teachers almost unanimously claimed they did not know what economic backgrounds their students came from. Ms. Mitchell described this conundrum:

Honestly, how would we know students who are? Only when it's brought to our attention through a social worker or somebody else. We don't know the class of the student. I don't know where they live unless they tell me. You can't base it

on how they dress because the most affluent students go to Value Village for their clothes because they're cool. There is absolutely no way, unless they stink and look dirty to know, and even then they just might have poor hygiene you know....I don't think they know at all. I know I don't.

In turn, class was only a framework at the ideological level for teachers. When it came to their actual practice and daily interactions they claimed to have no more knowledge or awareness of class than they did of race. Moreover, they were no more likely to take it into account when thinking of how to best serve students.

Why then, did teachers use class so frequently as an explanatory tool? Arguably, some of their reliance upon class was rooted in an awareness that the lowest income students were those who did the worst academically. These students did need specialized attention and support that, for the most part, they were not receiving. However, class was not merely emphasized because teachers thought it to be more pressing, it was also an identity that carried less political weight.

In the United States, race has been politicized in a way that class has not (Reed, 2000; Rubin, 1976). Moreover, racial divisiveness has hindered class solidarity (Dobbie, 2008). As Piven and Cloward (1979) write, the history of the United States is one of:

...failed efforts to [produce] multiracial, class-based protest movements. And so, when massive socioeconomic and political changes finally made an independent black struggle possible, black eruptions provoked the violent opposition of southern white working-class people and later the opposition of northern working-class people as well [widening working class racial divisions]. (p. xii)

Unlike many European countries where there have been widespread social movements around economic inequality (Thompson, 1963), in the United States popular discourse around class remains rooted in the belief that if you have not attained economic success it is because you have not worked hard enough (Patterson, 2000). Class simply “has not been a source of pride, critique, or collective consciousness” (Guinier & Torres, 2002). It is something that, for better or worse, we don't talk much about (Sacks, 2007).

Unfortunately, because of its lack of politicization, class has been co-opted as a safe retreat. In turn, in critiquing the ways in which class is used to subvert race, it is also necessary to critique the ways in which this subversion ultimately silences real disparities along lines of class.

All talk of the achievement gap has focused on racial inequality—it is this identity that is under heightened scrutiny in education reform. If teachers acknowledged that race was a factor in academic achievement or rates of suspension, they would also have to acknowledge that schools were biased against certain students based on a social identity that was immutable—or worse, that they were. This risk did not exist for class because while teachers could not argue that students could work harder and no longer be black, they could suggest that students and their families could work harder and no longer be poor. Poverty could be posited as the fault of individuals, families, and communities, not teachers. When low-income students failed to do well it was not an indictment on teachers or the larger social structure. Instead, it was expected and fit into the dominant narrative of American meritocracy. Race did not have this same cache.

### **b. The Blinding Nature of Culture**

The second way in which teachers used conflation was by framing their issues as cultural rather than racial. Bonilla-Silva (2010) talks about this frame as “cultural racism,” in which differences in behavior, style, language, and family structure, among other things, are used to justify racially biased feelings. Like white students in Chapter 5, teachers also argued that they were bothered by “those students” who were loud, used slang and Ebonics, sagged, and congregated in the hallways. They argued that their judgments were not about race, but rather cultural deficiencies that happened to be predominantly located in the bodies of black youth.

#### **i. Loud and Talkative**

Teachers often commented on the fact that the black youth were loud, talkative, disruptive, and poorly behaved. As Ms. Kennedy explained:

I know they did that study that um African Americans make up what 90% of the discipline referrals generally in schools...but I also find that they're generally the kids that don't stop talking when you ask them to and, “You can't disrespect me,” and that sort of thing, which I think is a culture thing, not necessarily a targeting.

Unlike many of her colleagues she was aware that there were racial differences in discipline, but Ms. Kennedy did not believe these racial disparities to be about targeting specific racial groups, rather she viewed it as an appropriate reaction to a group of students who consistently behaved in inappropriate ways. It just so happened that these

students were predominantly black. However, if all of the students who were disciplined for being “loud” and “talkative” were black, the school structure was, in fact, targeting black students without providing them with the tools, resources, or knowledge to perform in the ways valued and respected by their schools and teachers. The school was therefore denying students the opportunity to learn the “culture of power” while punishing them for the culture they came to school with (Delpit, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Tyson, 2003).

Mr. Wade was a teacher who did not personally think about himself as succumbing to cultural racism:

I’ve got white kids that are dumb asses too....I think it’s a cultural thing. And you can answer this better than me cause black people are louder in general....They’re just louder. I’m not used to it. So...is that a problem? No. I just wish you’d tone it down a little bit cause it hurts my ears. Does it bother me? No...you are what you is...[but] I can see some people struggle with it. I can see other people struggle with that.

It was clear that Mr. Wade also struggled to some degree with the noise of black students in the hallways. While Mr. Wade was also able to make a claim for cultural relativism (Bourgois, 2003; Herskovits, 1941)—the notion that cultures are neither better nor worse, just different, as he put it “you are what you is”—he ultimately argued that those students from cultures that were “naturally” louder were also naturally more bothersome.

## **ii. Congregating**

The narrative of “loud black students” could not be separated from the perception that black students were also more likely to dangerously “congregate” in the hallways. In the hallway one day, I had a conversation with a white male teacher who regularly subbed in the building. He revealed that it was often difficult for him to determine when black students were just having fun and when they might be engaging in conflictual altercations. As a result he often intervened in ways that were accusatory and aggressive because, as he described, “you can never be too safe.” Most of the time the black students were just being “hype,” making jokes, and having fun. As Goffman (1974) notes, “from an individual’s particular point of view, while one thing may momentarily appear to be what is really going on, in fact what is actually happening is plainly a joke, or a dream, or an accident, or a mistake, or a misunderstanding, or a deception, or a theatrical performance...” (p. 10). Because this teacher failed to recognize his own limited

experience with difference and lack of understanding of multiple ways of communicating, he subjectively assumed black students were up to no good and intervened based on these problematic assumptions in ways that could have resulted in referrals, suspensions, or more likely, the sense among black students that they were being unfairly targeted and criminalized.

### **iii. Ways with Words**

Teachers were also very disturbed by the ways in which black students spoke. They found this to be evidence that black students were not as committed to education as their white counterparts. Mr. McPhee was aware of the ways in which black students often had to code-switch from the linguistic traditions of their homes to those of the school:

The black students in my experience, is much lower than the white families.... How much they read, how much they write. It's just the way that they present themselves in speaking to others. The language that dictates our nation is based on the white male....And I'm not saying that black students have to conform to that and just be that way or assimilate....I think it's important to have a voice and it's almost a bilingual voice. But knowing when it's appropriate to speak, you know, without all the slang Ebonics...black vernacular with their friends or their family...They don't see that. Where the line is.

Mr. McPhee's realization that in order to be academically successful black students needed to be "bilingual," knowing how to speak both "standard English" and their home language, was very much aligned with theories of culturally relevant and culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). However, he did not believe this to be his responsibility to teach. Rather, he was frustrated that the black students did not come to school with this information already in hand.

In all of these instances teachers used some aspect of cultural performance to highlight their struggles and challenges with black students without naming race. Left unspoken were the ways in which "race" was a socially constructed category performed through cultural presentation to some degree.<sup>55</sup> As a result, when black students walked

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<sup>55</sup> In *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Black and the Crisis in African-American Culture* journalist Bakari Kitwana (2002) notes the connections between the legal criminalization of black youth and their criminalization in schools. One example he gives is that the "various styles of dress, hairstyles, and fashion popular among Black youth have been banned from many of the nation's schools..." (p. 16). This was definitely true at Jefferson where sagging (popular among black boys) and wearing head scarves

into the building they were seen as “an intrinsically ‘problematic’ population” (Pollock, 2004, p. 16).

Tyson (2003) asks what would happen if schools made “explicit to black students the goals of cultural socialization and the necessity for competence in their own as well as in the dominant, culture...?” Delpit (2006) agrees that if you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture make acquiring power easier” (p. 283). Unfortunately, there were few if any instances in which these norms were made transparent in such a way. As a result, “culture” served largely to reproduce notions of black inferiority.

### **3. Naturalization & Minimization**

Many of the teachers at Jefferson dealt with issues of race through naturalization and minimization. In both frames, race is acknowledged, but the extent to which it matters is understated, downplayed, or assumed to be a natural human trait.

#### **a. Segregation is No Big Deal**

Many teachers at Jefferson responded to the racial segregation of the cafeterias and other school spaces by claiming it was a “natural” phenomenon. This was a particularly appealing argument because so many of the teachers themselves had racially segregated lives. Nonetheless, their colorblind ideals made it difficult for them to decide whether or not this “naturally occurring” phenomenon was a problem. Ms. Guthrie realized that in many ways the segregation of the cafeteria—which she had only recently noticed—was a reflection of the larger society:

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(sometimes attempted by black girls) were frequent sites of conflict between students, teachers and administrators trying to enforce the “dress code.” Kelley (1997) writes in *Yo’ Mama’s DisFUNKtional!* that what is missed by scholars (and teachers) in such analyses is that “aesthetics, style, and visceral pleasures...have little to do with racism, poverty, and oppression...Once culture is seen as a static, measurable thing—behavior—that is either part of an old African or slave tradition or a product of dire circumstances, it is not hard to cast black people as pathological products of broken families, broken economies, and/or broken communities” (p. 9-10). Similarly, Morris (2006), Ferguson (2003) and Valenzuela (1999) all note the ways in which “style” is often used by teachers as a method of disciplining the bodies of students of color in particular in ways framed as “concern” rather than prejudice. Invoking Foucault’s notion of discipline within institutions, Morris writes, “the hidden curriculum...meant that while groups such as black girls and Latino boys endured much surveillance and correcting, adults allowed other students comparatively more freedom, appearing to consider them already acceptable” (p. 95).

Adults are no different than kids...Kids segregate by color because that's where their friends are. And I didn't even realize that till someone told me...I had to go look for myself...I don't see it as a problem...It's like people associate with people they feel comfortable with...People that you don't have to worry about if you say something that it's going to be misinterpreted, and that's what people do....So it's no different than if I go have lunch with three other women who are my age.

Ms. Mitchell agreed that segregation was a human issue. As she put it:

We all hang around with people we have things in common with and we have things in common with people of our same gender, our same race... And so I think the same thing goes [for students]...I think it would be naïve to think that you could break that up and that you could force them to be friends with and hang around people of different you know colors.

Ms. Mitchell was suggesting that the racial divisions of friend groups was immutable. Rather than seeing efforts to get students to talk to people different from them as an opportunity to find common ground, she saw it as an endeavor that would ultimately backfire. Mr. Edwards commented upon this duality of nature versus nurture. He said he often wondered "how much of that is human nature and how much of that is kids afraid of the unknown? I don't know." For him, the divisions between people were not necessarily "natural," rather they were the result of generations of fear that had been built in a highly inequitable society.

As earlier chapters have indicated, alone, none of these perspectives were particularly problematic. Rather teachers were commenting upon the reality that there is comfort and safety in hanging out with people like you, that most Americans do not have significant cross-racial friendships, and that you cannot force people to have relationships with each other. All of these things were true. Intuitively these teachers seemed to recognize the importance of having ethnic enclaves and opportunities to be with those people "like you." However, by making this argument alone, teachers missed an opportunity to engage with race in any critical way through the lens of segregation. Because they accepted these truths, they did not talk to their students, or each other, about segregation. They did not talk about whether students were having opportunities (or taking opportunities) to build relationships across difference in a school that was, by all definitions, integrated. Moreover, they were not able to address the ways in which this segregation was the foundation upon which hostile racial humor and racial intimidation

was built in the school. And finally, they assumed that race alone was a determining factor of “commonality.” While race is a factor that contributes to having a common life experience and a shared understanding of the world, the fact that students were not able to find connections across race was more a reflection of the taboo of crossing racial lines than of any immutable traits.

Some teachers did believe it was the role of the school to provide students with opportunities to interact across race. As a result, they supported the schools’ efforts to intervene in the cafeteria segregation. As Ms. Dunlap put it:

I know that I prefer being with women during my lunch, I know that. But my thing is that our job isn’t to provide the kids comfort...Part of our job is to...test their comfort levels. And I agree...that we do have an obligation because our society needs it. I did not work in the Civil Rights Movement so that we can have segregated classrooms or segregated lunchrooms. That’s not what I had in mind.

Mr. Edwards also believed that, “part of school is to introduce you to things that you don’t know, things that you are not familiar with. And you know, that means a tablemate that looks different than you: Beautiful. That’s a form of learning.” Mr. West said that while “as human beings we associate with people that we think are going to have similar interests” and jokingly admitted that he tends “to deal better with people who like Star Wars,” as an educator he believed students should be given opportunities to learn from each other and have new experiences.

The duality of teachers’ analyses was encouraging in many ways. They recognized both the need to give students opportunities to be with people who were different from them, while validating their need to be with those people like them. However, these teachers also used integration as a copout. They believed the beginning and end of the racial problems faced at the school were the segregated cafeterias. Rather than viewing segregation as a reflection of larger racial divisions between students that were consecrated in their very classrooms, these teachers often ended their critical analysis of race at the cafeteria door.

## **b. Just Jokes**

I’ll hear them crack little jokes. Fried chicken. Ya know. Things that typically southern black, ya know. Grits. Sweet potato pie. Those kinds of things.  
-Ms. Davie, white female teacher

Teachers who admitted hearing racial jokes among students largely viewed them as no big deal. When asked about racial issues at the school Ms. Kennedy said, "...it is truly kind of a joke here." Ms. Kennedy was very much aware of the degree of racial jokes happening between students:

Thinking of my 5th hour again because you had Sam and Josh and Kurt and so they would just, you know Sam and Josh would make jokes about black people and Kurt would make jokes about terrorists you know meaning Sam. And so...a couple of times I told them, I said one joke maybe funny but more than that's picking on someone. You know, but it worked for them.

Ms. Kennedy, was not completely oblivious to the problematic nature of this exchange. Rather she pointed out to students that making such comments repeatedly was closer to bullying than joking. However, she ultimately determined that this sort of interaction "worked for them." In some ways it was clear that these exchanges did "work for them." Students laughed, joked, and came back to class the next day ready to do it all over again. However, as pointed out in Chapters 4 and 5, most students had little recourse for dodging these kinds of attacks. As a result, "laughing along," was a common response, even among students who were personally offended by such exchanges. Moreover, the unidirectional nature of the jokes made them seem more problematic. The notion that "black jokes" and "terrorist jokes," without the addition of "white jokes," worked for students indicated a certain level of denial on the part of teachers about dominant racial hierarchies that these interactions were reinforcing.

In part, the explanation that these jokes "worked" was rooted in the belief of teachers that racial tensions and racial humor could not co-exist. Teachers "downgrad[ed] the possible links between humour and prejudice, as if what is to be celebrated should be kept distinct from that which is to be criticized" (Billig, 2001, p. 269). In other words, like students, teachers believed if students were making a joke, they weren't being hostile.

### **c. There are no Race Wars**

Teachers also minimized hostile racial interactions between racial groups by arguing, as Ms. McWilliams put it, "we don't have race wars here." Because there were very few overt physical altercations between students across race, teachers presumed that

race was not a significant point of conflict for students. Ms. McWilliams continued, “more often than not the two kids fighting are the same sex and the same race and the same socioeconomic, everything.” Chapter 5 explains some of the reasons why students were not likely to engage in cross-racial fights at Jefferson. It argues that the racial tensions between students actually facilitated racial norms in which cross-racial fighting was a taboo, in large part because black students were perceived as superior fighters and were already engaging in physical intimidation that made white students unlikely to pick a fight with them. Not only were teachers unaware of this dynamic, they did not have the ability to think about racial conflict as manifesting in ways beyond physical violence, making it easy for them to assume that students were, in fact, beyond race.

#### **d. It’s Better than It Used to Be**

Finally, teachers minimized racial incidents between students by arguing that it was better than other places, and that students of this generation were more accepting. A number of the more racially aware teachers believed that most of the race issues at Jefferson concerned the staff. They felt that in general students were living in a world that was approaching the post-racial. Ms. Wenzell explained:

What I’ve come to realize last year is that really it’s the adults that need to talk...I don’t think we even need to talk with students about racism because you can’t imagine, people can’t imagine...how much change will happen from this generation to this generation. ...I don’t think it’s as big of an issue as everyone makes it out to be. We want to heal somebody but we’re trying to heel something that’s not broke. Making me uncomfortable...I think we are moving into, it’s a lovely word. I think it’s moving into a direction like that.

Because teachers saw their own generation and their colleagues as having especially prominent issues with race, the progress they saw in their students made them overly confident about the state of race relations. Moreover, it allowed them to believe that their students did not need guidance when it came to issues of race.

#### **IV. SUPPORTING AVOIDANCE FROM THE TOP DOWN**

Chapter 3 explored the ways in which the Jefferson School District and high school willfully ignored issues of race and class. In so doing, teachers struggled greatly to navigate race on the ground. Teachers repeatedly reported that they did not feel supported

in dealing effectively with issues of race. In particular they felt that the culture and climate of the school was not one that supported race talk at an institutional level. When an attempt was made to engage teachers in such a conversation by the previous administration, it served only to reinscribe colorblind frames.

#### **A. Everything I know, I learned from Ruby Payne; aka Ruby Payne is a Pain**

The prominent usage of colorblind frames at Jefferson was in part the result of the only school-wide diversity effort targeted at teachers. Two years before this study began, Mr. Williams, the former principal, required that they read the popular book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* by Ruby Payne (2005). Payne's book reworks the "culture of poverty" thesis (Dworin & Bomer, 2008; Harvey & Reed, 1996; O. Lewis, 1959; O. Lewis, 1998), popular among social scientists in the 1960s and 70s, which argued that differential achievement among students is largely the result of the cultural deficiencies.

While a number of teachers were resistant to reading the book and were "outraged" at the imposition on their time and the topics it covered, the more interesting group was those who read and enjoyed it, but had limited prior exposure to race and class. These white teachers held on tightly to what they had learned, believing Ruby Payne to be the authority on all things black and poor. As one teacher put it sarcastically, after reading the book, "now they're experts in poverty. That's your basis of the entire black race." This newfound "expertise" served to validate teachers' tendency to attach the struggles of their racially marginalized students to class and culture. The fact that it was given to majority white teachers by a black man gave it even more credibility. If black people were telling white people this was how to deal with "their" students, it must be accurate.

Many teachers referenced the Payne book when talking to me, some without even realizing the source of their information. Ms. Russo was a particularly good example. She had only recently accepted the possibility that some people have more privilege than others by nature of their birth. Describing her transformation she said:

I had never believed until I started teaching that environment played a role in who you are....I thought that...if you want to be something...you're going to....I mean that's how I was raised. You work hard. Now I was also brought up in a very fortunate situation....So I guess it's easy for me to say that because I didn't have one without the other....But I realized over the years that it is a lot more difficult

to bring yourself up out of the situation. You know when nobody else in your house emphasizes education. A lot of people are sitting around, drinking, smoking weed, you know, smoking cigarettes.

Although Ms. Russo was more aware of the ways in which structural inequality affected life outcomes, she still ultimately relied upon very stereotypical and extreme depictions of marginalized students to justify their academic struggles. Using this wide leap, she revealed her own biases about students who came from different racial and economic backgrounds than her own, at the same time as she was trying to acknowledge how her privilege had facilitated her success. Reading Payne only reinforced these ideas:

This book points out, it's saying a lot of the students can't help it because these are the type of households they're raised in and they're just louder households. You know and they go into the whole thing that TVs are on...more of the time compared to white households, so they have to talk louder, you know, they go into that whole thing. They also talked about how you know a lot of the black students don't perform as well in school because louder households tend to, you know affect brain development and, I mean it was a great book.

While her argument was largely focused on cultural deficiency, she also connected this perceived difference to something biological (Fraser, 1995; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994)

Ms. Russo's analyses of the struggles faced by her black students treated race, class and culture as the same categories. By nature of being black she believed her students lived in environments in which they were not well off. Inherent in this analysis was that white students were not experiencing these things—that white families were not poor, were not addicted to substances, and were not avid TV watchers. However, as Chapter 2 revealed this simply was not the case at Jefferson.

Ironically, while Ms. Russo talked about these differences fairly dogmatically, she admitted “I mean, in the same respect, I was raised in a very loud household” she said, “I have a very loud voice.” Bonilla-Silva (2010) finds one aspect of the ideology of colorblindness is that it “gives room for exceptions...and allows for a variety of ways of holding on to the frames” (p. 48). Ms. Russo was not able to recognize the way in which her analysis of race and class challenged even her own upbringing, which she had highlighted as more ideal than those of her students. In so doing, she ultimately argued that middle-class white people like herself could get away with things (poor) black students could not. The Ruby Payne book did not help teachers understand poverty or race. Rather, it validated and reinforced problematic stereotypes they already held.

## **B. Lack of Support, Lack of Data, Lack of Time**

As Chapter 3 indicated, administrators at Jefferson were not doing a lot to support multicultural and diversity initiatives. In particular, because data was not disseminated it was easy for them to assume that the school was not facing any outcome-related race issues. Ms. McWilliams was particularly frustrated:

We don't talk about race here. We don't talk about how much money people have here. It's not a general topic of conversation....[we] pay somebody to come here and pretend to talk to us about our data that we don't have, which makes me crazy...I don't need you to come in here and take up my whole day to tell me how to work the numbers that someone will finally give them to me....This happens every time...year after year....I think that really, to have these conversations without numbers is dangerous. Because it's just about our personal beliefs....It's much easier to get people to change their viewpoint if you can show them why they are wrong. Okay so we don't have that problem here at Jefferson, then why is it that our failure rate for black students is blah blah blah, and our failure for white students in blah blah blah? Then I can live in my own little fantasyland that...that's not really the problem.

Ms. McWilliams believed strongly that without real data, discussing race was not only dangerous, it was likely to be unproductive. If teachers did not have to contend with the reality that there was an achievement gap at their school, that black students were punished more harshly for similar offenses, she found it unlikely they would admit there was any problem that needed to be dealt with.

In addition to the failure to disseminate data, the nature of educational reform was such that there was no time for issues of social justice. Some teachers believed that engaging students in conversations about race would be a worthwhile endeavor, but felt they had been told by the district and the state that this was not relevant to the curriculum they had been hired to teach. Ms. McWilliams explained this dilemma:

Can I justify going there when I have a list of curriculum that I'm supposed to cover that's this long and I'm not even going to cover anyway? It's nowhere in my curriculum. So if I could find a way to link that conversation back to [something] that's in the list of what I'm supposed to cover, I would really enjoy engaging in that conversation....Because it's about being a human being. There's more to it than just the academics...kids are people. But they're people who I'm supposed to teach how to problem solve inside the content that I've been hired to teach. So I struggle to figure out how I'm going to justify that.

This was an issue for a number of teachers who felt that taking time out of their schedule to talk about these issues was not aligned with the standards by which they were measured. Beyond some English and social studies courses, teachers felt that there were never opportunities to link these kinds of conversations back to their curricula.

### **C. A Culture of Fear and Avoidance**

While access to data, state mandated curriculum, and lack of administrative support created a structure in which dealing with race was a challenge, the major limitation was that Jefferson, like most schools, had cultivated a *culture* of fear and avoidance, maintained by teachers' lack of knowledge, skill and efficacy. Chapter 3 outlined many of the ways in which district administrators silenced and willfully ignored race. In this Chapter we have seen how this silencing trickled down to teachers who also adopted strategies of colorblindness. However, Ms. Armstrong believed "we could have a different philosophy of how we treat kids, that they're not gonna be, 'Oh, we got to have security there 'cause you know...a riot could break out....' Kids want to talk about stuff but there's no forum." Nonetheless, adult fears shut down her own efforts to provide an outlet for dialogue: "I noticed that when I first started here, I'm like you know there's....identity things going on...could we start a support group or something? 'Well there's a lot of legality about support groups' [I was told]. Fear. Everything's fear."

According to Ms. Rich the cultural issues at Jefferson were not only about fear, they were about the lack of trusting relationships between adult staff as well. Teachers were not comfortable talking to each other about issues of race, in part because they did not talk to each other much at all. "I don't know a lot of the teachers here," Ms. Rich said. "I feel like even though this is my third year of teaching that I don't know people here. I think a piece of it is school climate." As a result, although, as Ms. Conger said, "people are very curious and they want to have these conversations" there was great trepidation about doing so. According to Mr. Wade this was especially true because there was such a "big taboo about bringing up things that are related to race and class...I'm not sure people are really comfortable with examining their own feelings. You have to be willing to do that."

Other teachers cited failed previous attempts as the real discouraging factor. As Ms. Mitchell described, “we’ve tried and we’ve talked about it, but I just, I think it’s such a touchy issue. It’s just, you know. I’m not sure how to do it well. It’s never been done well.” As a result, a number believed that getting teachers to think about, let alone talk about race was a truly lost cause. Mr. Edwards had personally worked to bring up race among the staff:

We tried to do the Community Reads four years ago. The book, *Why Do All the Black Kids Sit Together in the Cafeteria?*, Beverly Daniel Tatum. And nobody showed up...[except] the 3 people who wanted to...actually lead the discussion... Nobody else came....So we talked about it for 20 minutes and that was the end of that. But that was the discussion I think teachers should have, especially with each other.

While Mr. Edwards believed that teachers should be having more discussions about race and difference, his own efforts suggested that many were not committed or comfortable enough to do so without a mandate. Ms. Wenzell agreed. In fact, she was more insistent:

*Ms. Wenzell:* I don’t think there’s any point in having teachers in this school try to get together and talk about race. Flat out.

*Shayla:* Well let me stop my dissertation research here. Thank you for your time.

*Ms. Wenzell:* There is NO POINT.

*Shayla:* Why do you say that?

*Ms. Wenzell:* Because...it is going to take the minds and hearts and souls of truly involved individuals who really do care about these students to become something else here. You’re not going to teach old dogs new tricks. If you got a bunch of old white people that work here that are not interested, no black people work here. They probably figure why do I need to talk about that? They don’t want to understand. They don’t care. To them they want to put it under the guise of, “Well they’re all just students.”...I think they need to retire. I don’t think you’re going to get anything out of these teachers. I swear to God girl. I’m not lying to you.

However, despite the strong sense among most teachers that the school culture would not support this conversation, the many teachers who critiqued the culture suggested otherwise. Teacher after privately revealed that they would like opportunities to think about race and class and wanted to develop the skills and knowledge to do so.

Unfortunately, many of these teachers were not talking to each other about their shared interest. As a result, most were unaware that they had colleagues who felt similarly.

#### **D. Teacher's Don't Know What to Do: Lack of Skill, Knowledge and Capacity**

Even teachers interested in race did not feel they had the knowledge or skill to talk about it. For example, Mr. McPhee believed that one way to be more effective with students from a range of backgrounds was to “just go out and get to know the kids and who they are.” However in reality he did not believe this was possible:

*Shayla:* And is that too much to ask teachers to do?

*Mr. McPhee:* Oh hell yes!...Because what is the role of a teacher? Come in, teach the content. Help kids learn the material. Not, “Oh, lets sit down.” That’s the counselor’s job. *I* believe it’s part of my job...[but] I don’t have time to do that... So it’s definitely...a struggle. I tell you that. I’m ready to hang up the coat and just walk out...Cause I’m in over my head.

Many teachers felt this way. They were being asked to do a lot with very few resources. The notion that they would also have time to build relationships with 150 students from different racial, economic and cultural backgrounds, engage these diverse students in challenging discussions about difference, social justice, and inequality, and intervene in the problematic things they said and did to each other was simply too much. In part it was too much because they did not have appropriate training to do so. When Ms. Stovall was asked about how she responded to hyper-racialized student interactions she said:

I’m not a counselor. I don’t get sucked into all that so much. It’s just too much for me to handle, but racism, or those kinds of things are very hurtful, and I would love to be able to do something. I hesitate, I’ve always hesitated....I think a lot of teachers, and I’m guilty of it, you avoid issues that are hard to deal with. And I really would love to do that, but I feel like, one I don’t have a lot of time in my curriculum, two, I want it to be done well and I don’t have the training....How do you allow the kids to open up and really deal with these issues and not explode inappropriately?...That’s really hard to do and I feel like you have to have some training.

Unlike many of her colleagues, Ms. Stovall actually did have a lot of intellectual knowledge when it came to race. She was a social studies teacher who had been born to activist parents. She was knowledgeable about U.S. racial history and was working to incorporate this content into her classroom. In addition, she had had very significant life

relationships with people of color (Perry, 2002). However, these things were not enough. “Color-consciousness” did not give her the tools or confidence to facilitate conversations about race. Teachers needed something more and, as the previous section indicated, schools were not giving it to them.

It was clear that teachers felt they lacked the institutional and cultural support to develop the knowledge, skill and capacity to effectively engage race. While a number of the challenges faced by teachers were personal and individual, many more were structural. Moreover, the personal anxieties they held could have potentially been addressed had the school and the district prioritized race, social justice, and critical education. Perhaps not surprisingly then, when I asked teachers about incorporating issues of race and justice in their classroom, teacher after teacher requested a student panel, PD on facilitating discussions about race, and the opportunity to continue having conversations with me about these issues—anything that would help them do a better job.

## **VII. CONCLUSION: (WHY) WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT RACE**

Racism for whites has been like a crazy uncle who has been locked away for generations in the hidden attic of our collective social reality. This old relative has been part of the family for a long time. Everyone knows he’s living with us, because we bring him food and water occasionally, but nobody wants to take him out in public.

-Gary Howard, *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know* p. 56

Teachers at Jefferson High School, like most teachers in the United States, struggled greatly with how they should think and talk about race. Some teachers claimed they did not see race, that kids were kids, while others had an intellectual understanding of racial inequality and were willing to engage in conversations about how race mattered in their classrooms and in their relationships with students. However, in practice these groups of teachers—as well as their colleagues who fell in between—were not so different from each other. When it came to understanding disparities in academic achievement, racial differences in discipline, and hostile student interactions across race, teachers from all ideological perspectives used frames that diminished the role of race and allowed teachers to make sense of the racial tensions, inequalities and fissures without actually having to acknowledge race or deal with personal or structural racism.

Teachers did not engage students in conversations about the ways in which race mattered in their daily lives, nor did they address the verbal and physical racial bullying

happening in the school. Instead, they only engaged with students around race in hyper-racial ways that were “joking” and no more productive than the exchanges students were having with each other. These jokes barely concealed the actual tensions that students and teachers had with one another across race.

Many teachers were aware that race mattered. Their willingness to engage me in long conversations about issues of identity and justice, their interest in the Ruby Payne book, their requests for data, and their attempts to make their courses more multicultural were evidence of this. So why was it that they were not able to do more?

At Jefferson, like most public schools in the country, teachers were dealing with a number of obstacles that made it virtually impossible for them to think about race more proactively. Many teachers had very limited personal experiences dealing with race and feared the possibility that they would be accused of being racist if they talked about race. Moreover, teachers did not feel they had the skill, knowledge, training, or capacity to have this conversation effectively. These issues were magnified by the fact that they did not feel supported by their administrators or school system.

However, despite these challenges it was important to talk about race at Jefferson, just as it is at all schools in the United States. By failing to provide them with structured opportunities to do so, students were learning to handle race with no guidance. Ms. Davie believed that engaging students in conversations about difference really was essential to making them productive citizens:

If you don't talk about them and put your ideas on the table, how are they going to learn? Aren't we a place of education?...[I]f you can change the ideas and attitudes of some of these kids, then we might have less problems that exists [in the world]....The job is to educate students in the content, but...I think...teachers need to really tell them how to become good citizens....I know the state of the education system that we have right now, I don't know if they're really so worried about the social aspects or the humanistic aspects as they are about the academic aspects...I think you need to have a complete package when you're walking out the door....This is the time where we should talk about race and to be aware of each other's cultures and so forth and to eliminate those myths so that we have a better understanding of, “Oh hey that person who sits next to me might be a six foot two black man that plays basketball here...but you know what, he puts his pants on the same way. His mom and dad work. They like nice things, just like my parents. We both want to have a decent education, get a decent job,” and so on....I think we still, as much as we don't want discrimination of anything, it's so

out there. It's so blatant...It's like, how do you stop it if you can't stop it with these kids?

She believed that the only way to interrupt societal discrimination and inequality was to interrupt it among students in schools. Unfortunately in most schools these opportunities for learning simply were not happening. This was not the fault of Jefferson High School, rather, as Ms. Davie noted, the entire system of education in the United States as it currently stands does not value “the social aspects or the humanistic aspects” of learning.

However, many students believed that talking about race was essential. Moreover, they were already doing it amongst themselves. Kiara thought discussing race in class would help students “be more informed with each other...Like I feel there's some kind of connection between our races, we just need to find it...” Left unspoken was that without such opportunities students were unlikely to find connections across race—especially in an environment in which racial humor and stereotypical ideas of racial performance were so ingrained.

In turn, the most important reasons for teachers to talk about race with each other and their students was to interrupt the racial discrimination and bullying happening between students. As Nathan explained, “if no one tells them that's not funny they just keep going on with it.” Ed agreed that most students at Jefferson realized something that teachers did not—that the issues they faced in their social interactions were relevant beyond teenager banter. In fact, they were the kinds of issues they would face throughout their lives, and schools needed to be helping them learn how to deal with them. Felicia explained:

*Shayla:* Does race or jokes or anything like that every come up in class, like initiated by a teacher?

*Felicia:* No, I wish it did though. I would be the first person in that class. I like debate classes and I feel like sometimes we should debate on like race. Like not black against white, but we should just all sit down and have a conversation like, like we're doing now! Like do you feel like I should be able to say the N-word?...I guess, it's a good school, it's great, great education and all that stuff, but it's just white. Like I say, they worry about the dumb stuff, you know, worried about your pants sagging, but they don't worry about the fact that you just got into a fight with somebody over racial stuff... They don't do that.

What students needed was a school in which “the fact that you just got into a fight with somebody over racial stuff,” was not ignored, but rather used as the impetus for learning. And it would take more than raised consciousness to provide it. Instead, teachers and students both needed models for how to have conversations about difference that were not couched in jokes or focused on “dumb stuff.” They needed opportunities and spaces to have serious race talk. In the final section of the dissertation, I explore my efforts to provide such a space.

## CHAPTER 7

### The Promise of Dialogue with Students and Teachers

#### I. INTRODUCTION

The seven teachers were sitting nervously in a circle in blue plastic chairs. The classroom, which had been empty most of the year, had bare walls, save the handwritten list of ground rules the teachers had developed in the first professional development session. For weeks now they had been anticipating this day, but were anxious nonetheless about what they would hear. “So how are you feeling going into this conversation with students?” Naomi asked.

*Ms. Stovall (white):* I’m excited. I feel disconnected from student culture, so I’m looking forward to hearing what they have to say.

*Ms. Gorski (white):* I don’t think we’re ready.

*Naomi (white, co-facilitator):* Ready for what?

*Ms. Gorski:* To hear the unknown. To hear what they think. We understand things differently than they do.

*Ms. McCandless (white):* I told my students I was going to be talking with some of their classmates this afternoon about race, and I asked them how they were feeling about the conversations we’ve been having in our class about race as it relates to the book we’re reading. I thought it was going okay, but my question unearthed a lot of feelings from the students that I was not prepared for. It made me feel gross. Students started using derogatory language. I was so uncomfortable.

*Naomi:* I think the fact that they shared so much with you means that there must be some level of safety and comfort....

In another room, I was talking to students about what they should expect in the next hour. Like the adults, they were worried about how they would be perceived and about whether or not this conversation would lead to conflict. They had never talked to a teacher in the way they soon would. I encouraged them to feel safe being honest about

their feelings and took any last questions. Minutes later, I led the students to the room where the teachers were waiting and asked them to sit in the empty chairs dispersed throughout the circle. Both groups were anxious and unsure. Despite this apprehension, they wanted to listen to and learn from one another. The conversation began.

\*                      \*                      \*

For two weeks Naomi and I had worked with the Intergroup students to prepare them for the hour long dialogue they were going to have with their teachers who were simultaneously participating in a teacher professional development workshop that we were facilitating. We provided them with the following guiding questions to help them brainstorm what they wanted to share with their teachers:

- A. How do students from different racial groups get along at this school? How does that make you feel?
- B. How does race influence how students get along with teachers?
- C. If you could tell teachers one thing about race at this school, what would it be?

Students came up with answers individually and then collectively decided what they would share with the teachers. Much of what they came up with directly mapped onto my ethnographic findings from the previous year. As a result, the dialogue between students and teachers covered much of what Chapters 3-6 highlighted. Students and teachers talked about segregation, racial differences in discipline, and teachers' failures to interrupt racial bullying. Afterwards, I accompanied the students out of the room. They were excited, relieved, and amazed that they had gotten a chance to talk to their teachers about their perspectives on race. It had gone so well that a number of them said they wanted to come back the following week.

When I went back into the classroom where the teachers were I asked how they thought the conversation had gone:

*Ms. McCandless:* I'm glad it's over....I was upset inside because of the students' perception about inequitable discipline. It was good to have Shayla's reminder: This is reality. The data backs it up. I have such a hard time believing that is true.

*Ms. Mitchell (white):* Maybe we needed more time. Once it got specific, it got uncomfortable, but if we always stay safe, we won't learn. I thought about my own discipline in class, and I betcha, I write up more black than white. Not intentionally, but the infractions I am supposed to report are more often violated by those students. It's a vicious circle, and I don't know what to do. I feel like my

hands are tied. I don't have control over punishments beyond my referrals, but I take the blame.

*Ms. Flournoy (white):* I was totally blown away by the lunchroom thing. Why assign students if it's not enforced? This conversation really opened my eyes. It needs to be more widespread. I'm going to see things differently now and make changes in my classroom. I'm going to challenge the things I ignored in the past. The kids were so strong. It was really, really good.

*Ms. Stovall:* It was a great start. I think it would be great to do more and make this ongoing. I would like more dialogue. If the perception is that things aren't dealt with, I would like to change that. I will make more of an effort, will be more aware, and will get to know students better. I am worried about some students, especially Jasmine, walking away frustrated.

*Ms. Gorski:* I'm queasy about trying to make a change here in this school environment. But we, as educators, need to step up to the plate more.

In many ways, this conversation was the pinnacle of two years of work. Teachers and students came together, on equal ground, to learn from each other, and to consider how they might work together to improve race relations in their school. Although there were tense, uncomfortable moments, they felt the session was a successful first step.

This chapter explores teachers' experiences in a 5-session, 10-hour professional development workshop on race in the classroom, and students' experiences in a 20-week, multi-identity, afterschool intergroup dialogue program. It suggests that intergroup dialogue has the potential to provide young people and their teachers with opportunities to think critically about their roles in maintaining (or interrupting) a school system in which hierarchical race relations are reproduced.

## **II. RACE TALK IN SCHOOLS**

I have argued thus far that the teachers and administrators at Jefferson High School, like most public schools, were doing students a disservice by avoiding conversations about race. I have suggested that conflicts, discriminatory interactions, and racially hostile discourse between students, and between students and their teachers, were heightened because of the fear and discomfort of adults when it came to addressing race. Implicit in this argument is my belief that schools *should be* discussing race—both among teachers and administrators when considering the challenges to successfully

educating all students, and among students and teachers in efforts to redirect negative student exchanges.

Despite this recommendation, the reality is that “race talk,” is a complex and complicated endeavor. While simple on the surface, suggesting that teachers “just talk about it” presumes that conversations about race tend to be successful, and that anyone who decides to “talk race” can do so well. Moreover, it suggests that no other skills or training are needed beyond personal commitment and life experiences when it comes to discussing race productively. To the contrary, “talking race” is just as likely to lead to conflict as it is to interrupt it—the experiences of teachers and students in previous chapters serve as a good example. What then am I recommending when I suggest that schools talk about race? How do I envision this happening? And how did I do it with the students and teachers at Jefferson?

My role at Jefferson was part researcher and part practitioner. Although I was not being paid for my time, during the two years of my study I conducted a student and teacher intervention around race and social justice. The goal was two-fold. As a researcher and social worker, I was interested in how a program such as Intergroup might address the many challenges around race faced by students and teachers. In addition to the research objectives, I viewed the free programming as a way to ensure my work was beneficial to Jefferson as well by offering them a first step in how they might create a more socially just school.

### **A. Toward A Theory and Model of Practice**

There are many practice models in the fields of education, social work and psychology of engaging in structured conversations about race. My work at Jefferson drew specifically upon models of intergroup dialogue (Zuniga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker, 2007) and was rooted in approaches to social justice education (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). Dialogue—facilitated, sustained, face-to-face conversations across difference—draws upon critical pedagogy (Freire, 2000; Giroux & Robbins, 2006), theories of critical multiculturalism (Banks, 2007; Gay, 1994; Gay, 2010; Sleeter & Grant, 1987b; Sleeter, 1992; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995; Sleeter, 1996) as well as intergroup contact theory, which proposes that the tensions among groups can be reduced

through systematic contact in a cooperative environment (Pettigrew, 1998). These models seek to create schools and educational systems that value diverse experiences, provide equal access and opportunity to all students, help individuals dismantle their own biases, and prepare young people to be critically engaged citizens (Shor, 1992).

Critical pedagogy is a cyclical process of thinking, reflection, and action (praxis) in which the roles of teacher and learner are blurred, allowing for the co-construction of knowledge (Giroux, 1988). Critical pedagogy helps participants develop a critical consciousness of inequitable distributions of power and learn to situate their own lived experiences in the context of the larger social system. It questions the dominant norms that privilege, exclude, oppress, and marginalize, and has the ultimate goal of empowering oppressed groups to take liberatory action. Drawing on critical pedagogy, critical multiculturalists specifically seek to create more socially just schools through combating structural inequality around issues of race and other identities (Dobbie & Richards-Schuster, 2008).

In dialogue participants explore, challenge, and work to overcome the biases they hold about members of their own and other groups. Participants learn to non-violently and collaboratively negotiate intergroup conflict with the goal of increasing social justice and ending oppression. Intergroup dialogue is different than discussion. While the goal of discussion is to share opinions and often to “win,” the goal of dialogue is to seek to increase understanding (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007; Schoem & Hurtado, 2001; Zuniga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker, 2007; Zúñiga, 2007).

In practice, dialogue consists of two components—content, or the delivery of information about race and racial inequality, and process—or the pedagogical approach to discussing these issues. In *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* Adams, Bell and Griffin (2007) provide models of both social justice content and pedagogical approaches, which informed the work I did at Jefferson.

The content covered with both students and teachers was largely based on their own life experiences and built upon the findings of Chapters 3-6. Participants were not required to do outside reading or assignments (although many of the teachers agreed to keep journals of their experience). However, like Adams, Bell and Griffin, I found that both groups “lack[ed] sufficient historical knowledge to make sense of the maintenance

and reproduction of oppression in contemporary life” (p. xviii). Unfortunately, given the time constraints and the voluntary nature of the groups, I could not “re-educate” participants in the exhaustive “history of race.” In other words, while I did provide some social and historical context, much of the conversation was focused on teachers and students’ own daily experiences of race. Sometimes I was able to provide them with a broader context in which to situate these experiences, and sometimes I was not.

For example, students really struggled to understand the historical context in which the N-word emerged. They knew only that it was a “bad” term white slave owners had used and black people had re-appropriated. Similarly, teachers often struggled to think about race beyond their perception that they personally did not “discriminate against” black people. They were surprised by things like racial achievement gaps, which suggested larger trends of inequality. Despite these limitations, the diversity of experiences in the room, as well as, the supplemental information I provided during sessions, proved to be more than enough content for the time we had for dialogue.

In early sessions, we worked to build community and safety among the group. This process included collectively developing group norms and guidelines, exploring hopes and fears for the conversation, and getting to know each other on a personal level. For students this meant doing a number of fun community building exercises in which we were not talking about “hot topics.” For teachers this included conversations about why they became educators and what they hoped to get out of the workshop series. This allowed them to find common ground over a shared commitment. In addition, we used the LARA model of communication in which you Listen with an open mind, Affirm a point of common ground in what the other person has said, Respond to what the person has raised, and Add new information (Tinker, 2006). This provided a structure for discussing difficult and controversial topics. In turn, when something challenging came up, instead of aggressively or defensively attacking each other, students and teachers were encouraged to stop and listen and respond in a way that was respectful. For the most part, they did so successfully.

The sessions took a Freiran approach described by Adams, Bell & Griffin (2007):

The facilitator’s role in Freirean pedagogy is to provide structure and ask questions until participants begin asking questions of themselves and of each other, to generate the data for critical thinking. Chairs arranged in a circle rather

than in rows...reinforce the imagery of co-learners and co-facilitators. Small groups provide spaces for group listening or action brainstorming...(p. 31)

Our groups were both structured in this way. We did not position ourselves as “experts,” rather our role was to pose open-ended, thought provoking questions that prompted dialogue and critical reflection. As Zuniga et al. (2007) describe:

In intergroup dialogue, facilitation means active, responsive guidance, not formal instruction...Rather than simply presenting data, concepts, and theories, facilitators engage individual participants and the group in reflecting, sharing, and dialoguing about perspectives, feelings, and desires that are both personally and socially relevant...They are co-participants, not experts, in the dialogue process. (p. x)

We took seriously our role as participants. As Menna described:

You guys get to sit down and actually be involved...like you guys are just adults and you give us things to do, but you guys do it too. Just like us but, you're more authorized I guess... I think it's just cool, yeah...cause like normally when you talk to adults you have to listen to them and just feel like, I don't know. It's just that you really don't get to interact with adults like that.

Because of the planning and organizing we had to do, it was not possible to participate in every activity, but for the most part if we did an icebreaker, a closing or a community building activity with students or teachers we participated as well. As a result they felt more connected to us because we were not requesting something of them that we were not willing to do ourselves. As Raymond observed in order to “go there” with students in terms of talking about race, class, bullying and discrimination, teachers had to be willing to do it themselves. We regularly modeled our willingness for students and teachers.

Our role required accepting participants where they were, encouraging sharing, and working hard not to judge them for their “experience or lack of experience.” The focus was on raising consciousness of other people’s experiences and worldviews rather than being “right” or “wrong.” We attempted to balance these personal experiences with an increased understanding of structural inequality that falls along lines of race.

Dialogue also requires a recognition of emotion. Naomi and I were prepared for and transparent about the fact that people *feel* things about race and that these feelings cannot be disconnected from learning. We tried to create an atmosphere that allowed participants to use their feelings to facilitate their learning, rather than one in which those

feelings were ignored. Because we had worked hard to create a safe space for co-learning, and to acknowledge multiple perspectives and experiences, teachers and students were often willing to share things about their racial ideologies and biases that they otherwise would not have. This sharing provided the content for the conversations we had. Although Naomi and I had developed a curriculum for the teacher workshop, they often led us in a different direction. For example, one day we spent 20 minutes talking about “politically correct” racial terminology after teachers revealed that some of their hesitance in talking about race stemmed from the fact that they did not know which terms to use when referring to students from different racial backgrounds.

Finally, throughout the process we were transparent with students and teachers about both *what* we were doing and *how* we were doing it. We told them why it was important to build community. We actively practiced using LARA prior to discussing race. We let them know when their input was changing the direction we had planned to take. And we admitted when we did not know things.

## **B. Program Development**

### **1. Student Program**

During the 2009-2010 school year, 20 students from Jefferson who I had interviewed and observed in hallways, classrooms and lunchrooms, participated in the 20-week, afterschool intergroup dialogue program (see Garvin, 2008; Griffin, Brown, & Warren, 2012; Spencer, Abdullah, Brown, & Griffin, 2008 for more detailed program development and description). The program curriculum, written by Charles Garvin, Michael Spencer, and Naomi Warren, engaged students in dialogue about multiple social identities including race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and ability status. Through these conversations, students were encouraged to think more critically about their daily interactions, to make change in their own problematic behaviors, and to interrupt bullying and discrimination they witnessed among their peers.

All 11<sup>th</sup> grade students were invited to participate in the program. We recruited participants by making announcements over the PA, inviting individual students who teachers recommended, and doing presentations in all 11<sup>th</sup> grade English classes. Interested students were invited to an informational meeting afterschool to find out more

about what the program would entail. For the purposes of evaluation, I actively encouraged many of the students I had already interviewed to participate. I particularly focused on white students and male students who were harder to recruit. For example, Willie described his reason for joining the group:

You know you have a different charisma. Like you're very enthusiastic about things and that's what actually got me to come because I, I don't think I was going to come to Intergroup but you, you know you were really excited about it and you just kind of beat me up to come here. So I was, all right I'll go see it, check it out. See what it's about.

Willie's comments suggested that Intergroup was not something that a black male student naturally saw as exciting. While he was curious and interested, he likely would not have independently decided to join the group based on seeing it advertised in posters or hearing announcements over the PA. Instead, it was the personal connection I made with him, and the enthusiasm about the program I brought that encouraged him to give it a try. Overall, about thirty students chose to participate (S. R. Griffin, Brown, & Warren, 2012), twenty of whom also agreed to do interviews about their experience.

Table 7.1 INTERGROUP PARTICIPANTS BY RACE 2009-2010

	Female	Male	<b>TOTAL</b>
White/Caucasian	4	3	<b>7</b>
Black/African American	4	5	<b>9</b>
Multiracial (Asian & White)	1	1	<b>2</b>
Multiracial (Black & White)	2	0	<b>2</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>20</b>

## 2. Teacher Program

Unlike the student program, the teacher professional development was designed specifically for the teachers at Jefferson. After working at Jefferson for a year and a half it became clear that at least some teachers might be interested in exploring race and that they needed support to do so effectively. I began collecting input from teachers and administrators about what a teacher program might look like and the number of hours teachers would be willing to commit to this work. I also developed a curriculum rooted in dialogic principals that sought to address the specific issues that teachers at Jefferson were dealing with based on the year and a half of ethnographic research I had already

conducted. The series was made up of five, 2-hour sessions. In May of 2011, seven teachers—all white, ranging in age from early-thirties to mid-fifties—met for the professional development workshop co-facilitated by me and Naomi Warren, the co-facilitator of the Intergroup afterschool program.

All teachers in the building were invited to participate through e-mail. In addition, I made personal appeals to many of the teachers I had already interviewed. Given the culture of silence, willful ignorance and colorblindness among adults at Jefferson, it was notable that seven teachers were willing to openly talk about issues of race with their colleagues. Teachers had various reasons for deciding to do the workshop. One admitted that she simply needed the professional development hours. Other teachers were explicitly interested in issues of race and diversity and saw the workshop as an opportunity to pursue their interest or address some of the specific challenges they were facing, typically with black students. Finally, two of the teachers got involved because they had heard about or participated in the dialogue work I was doing with students. As one teacher put it:

I was just curious what you were doing with the kids. Short of coming and observing, which I don't think, it didn't feel like that was an appropriate way to explore what you were doing 'cause you were building relationships with these kids, it didn't seem like, yeah, let's just go jump in and watch. And it seems like, okay well if the kids are willing to take those risks I guess I can too, let me go find out what it's about by participating.

Because she had heard so much about the student program over the year and a half I had already been at the school, she saw the teacher PD as an opportunity to see first hand the kind of work I was doing. Moreover, she recognized the risk that students had been willing to take for two years, and decided it was important for teachers to be engaging in a similar process.

Another teacher participated because she had a student who was in the 2010-2011 Intergroup cohort. She described her motivation. "I'm sure it had to do with the fact that I had been a little bit involved with Intergroup," she said. Tom...telling me that the discussions you guys have there remind him of the discussions we have in [class] and he just really thought I would like it a lot. And it's right down my alley or something." Because of her student's experience the professional development seemed worthwhile.

All of these teachers were teachers interested in thinking about issues of race in a structured way with colleagues—even in a school setting in which it may have seemed otherwise. At least one of the teachers went through great lengths to participate in the program, re-arranging childcare for young children in a way that was less than convenient. Obviously, they were truly committed to exploring these issues.

Perhaps not surprisingly, none of the seven teachers who participated in the workshop were colorblind. While some struggled with if and how much they should see race and all of them struggled with how race mattered for their teaching practice, and utilized colorblind frames at various times to make sense of racial disparities, none of the seven teachers believed that “a kid is a kid.” They very much saw, and admitted to seeing, the ways in which students from different racial backgrounds seemed to have different cultural displays, different experiences in the school and, in some cases, different interactions with them as teachers. This suggests that those teachers who volunteer to do this kind of explicit reform work around race are likely to be those who have already thought about race as a significant factor in the school. While racial ideology did not have a significant impact on how teachers explained racial disparities, it did impact their motivation to do more work around it.

Over the five sessions we developed group guidelines; talked about and practiced communication techniques; discussed school-wide data related to racial disparities; talked about racial and ethnic labels; discussed the ways in which we had been socialized around race and class identities; explored the difference between colorblindness and color consciousness; and reviewed actual scenarios teachers faced in their classrooms regarding issues of race. In addition, we invited a guest speaker, a white male teacher who was successful with students of color from another district, and students from the Intergroup program to engage in dialogue with teachers and present their perspectives about how race and class mattered in their school. Like students, six of the seven teachers participated in post-interviews about their experience. This chapter is based on my observations and participation in both the groups as well as the interviews conducted with students.

### **C. Limitations & The Role of the Facilitator/Researcher**

There is no doubt that a lot of what I was able to do with students and teachers was facilitated by the fact that they liked me, I had relationships with them, and I could commit a significant amount of time to making these projects happen. As a result, when considering if this is a model that can be replicated there are many limitations (see Griffin, Brown and Warren, 2012, for a more extensive analysis of the limitations). When I started at Jefferson I had already been doing dialogue work with students and adults for a number of years. In other words, I was a trained and experienced facilitator. In addition, I had studied race for years. While I often made mistakes as a facilitator, I had a level of comfort talking about race that most teachers and administrators do not. Moreover, it is unlikely that teachers and administrators will be in positions in which they can dedicate the time and commitment to develop such a level of comfort.

In addition, by the time I started the teacher program, I had been at Jefferson for a year and a half. In fact, most of the teachers admitted their relationship with me was what encouraged their participation. As Ms. Brown noted:

You have been working for this already, because we know you from last year. So, yeah, maybe, I, I'm pretty certain that this is a reinforcement that people would sign up to go because we know you... Your work is legitimate... I think you were strong in your commitment to your work. But you were saying, "I'm working on this." And you put effort into it. You know, time definitely, and all those things. So that does make a difference.

In other words, I had developed trusting relationships with most of the adult participants and had "proven myself." This created a level of trust that would not have been possible had they felt negatively about me as a person or had they only met me at the beginning of the workshop.

In addition, I was not being paid for my time. Because I was, in part, doing this work to give back to the school, it did not require any additional resources on their part. I recruited the teachers and students, organized all of the sessions, arranged the room, and took care of advertising and reminders. Beyond approving the project, and approving continuing education credits for teachers, Jefferson High School did not have to *do* anything to make these interventions happen. As it stands, school reform has made it difficult to enact models of practice in which schools serve as public, democratic

institutions meant to build well-rounded, critically thinking, engaged citizens. The difficulty of committing the kinds of resources necessary for this work should not be overlooked.

Finally, even with my personal commitment, this project was not done at scale. I worked with seven teachers and 20 students in a school of 1500. As a result, I do not believe this work significantly changed the culture or climate of the school around race. In fact, during the 2011-2012 school year I had conversations with a new group of students at Jefferson who had not been involved in the original study. Their race talk was virtually identical to that of students in 2009. Nonetheless, I do believe that models of social justice education and intergroup dialogue have a lot of promise in creating schools that interrupt racial reproduction.

### **III. THE PROMISE OF DIALOUGE**

What is presented in the remainder of this chapter is what I call the “promise” of intergroup dialogue. As has been noted, my role at Jefferson was complicated and enriching because I was serving as both a practitioner and a researcher. While this provided me with opportunities to really push students and teachers to think about race more deeply, to ask probing questions beyond the scope of a polite interview, and to observe change overtime, it also meant I was by no means a neutral observer in the traditional anthropological sense. Rather I was fully a participant, whose presence shaped every aspect of my findings. In turn, when I “interviewed” students and teachers, our exchanges were often more the conversation of old colleagues than that of researcher and informant. As a result, all that is presented here is filtered through both my interpretation of their experience, as well as their decisions about what they could and could not say to me given our relationship. Despite these limitations, I believe I developed strong enough relationships with most of the students and teachers that what they shared was genuine. While what is presented in this chapter largely reflects positively on my work, it does not mean there were no problems, or that the transformations reported were always sustained or experienced by every participant. However, I chose, nonetheless, to present this data because I think that it reveals the *potential* of a model such as this to change the way in which race is addressed in schools.

## A. Students

Teachers are really focused on...schoolwork and...they miss their—and this is part of the administration too—they miss their bigger task of what they're trying to do. Instead of just forcing...all of this bookwork...teachers [should be] doing what their name implies. They're supposed to teach you...about life....Intergroup does that. Intergroup takes everything that the teachers don't want to...deal with...and they teach you.

-Raymond, black, Intergroup participant

It opens our eyes. Like I noticed more of the things that we talk about, like people making [racial] jokes. We need to be the ones to start saying, "Hey that's not cool," so that...maybe it'll click in other people's heads and that'll just keep passing around.

-Whitney, mixed, Intergroup participant

After participating in Intergroup, many students reported thinking more critically about segregation, racial stereotypes, and racial humor. As Leah noted, "I think you like can't change something like if you don't understand it." As students' understanding increased, they reported being less likely to engage in racial bullying and more likely to take action to interrupt racial discrimination among peers. They said racial jokes, slurs, tensions, stereotypes, and misunderstandings were primarily the result of a lack of awareness and education and the failure of adults to provide them with direction. Ultimately, students believed that Intergroup had the potential to improve school climate and culture and advocated for its expansion and for the involvement of teachers in the dialogue process.

### 1. Rethinking Segregation: Transformation through Intergroup Contact

Our high school friendship had been forged not because we were black and white but because we shared a similar take on reality. Racial difference meant that we had to struggle to claim the integrity of that bonding....

-bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* p. 26

Intergroup was a space unlike any most students had experienced, not only because they were being given the opportunity to engage in structured, facilitated conversation about race, but also because they were doing so in a racially integrated space. Having sustained contact and deep discussion with peers who were from different racial backgrounds was the source of many of the transformations students reported. As Danny put it, Intergroup, "gave me good conversations to have with people that I had never really talked with before."

The integrated space provoked students to think more deeply about how segregation is maintained, and the benefits and risks of challenging it. In Chapter 4, students talked about segregation as no big deal. By the end of the program some were connecting segregation to larger social divisions. For example, Hailey, a white student, was beginning to think about the ways in which culture and racial identity mapped onto each other and facilitated segregation among students:

I think maybe in high school it's a bit like, racism is just because like the type of people that you are. Because I noticed that mainly African American people, like their music genre and stuff is different and their style is different so maybe that's why we don't really mix in because I don't really see us mixing in very often.

Rather than claiming, like many students had, that differences in “style” and “music” were not at all about race, Hailey noted that race and culture at Jefferson were not only impossible to disconnect, but were also the impetus for racism.

Maria, a black student, described the sources of segregation as being related to prejudice and social divisions: “I think it's...[how we] were raised....Cause like sometimes in my family, like we'll think that like white people are trying to get after us....I think it's because we mistake...how people act with what a race might act like...You can't really generalize like a person because of their race....like my family generalizes white people.” Maria came from a family that, like most black families, was actively trying to prepare their children to live in a world in which they were on the bottom of the racial hierarchy. Maria was able to connect the sentiments of her family to her own racially segregated school experience. As a result, she was able to acknowledge that segregation within schools went far beyond “friend groups” and “having things in common.”

Jasmine also noted that Intergroup “was very different...cause they had like a lot of different races....I don't think that's how people's lives generally are because I feel like a lot of families, or at least the families I know of, have like stereotypes of other races.” Although Intergroup was not able to interrupt larger social trends of racist white families (see Chapter 4), and wary black ones, and did not lead white students to the black cafeteria, or vice-versa, it did give students some opportunities to think about the world beyond their own group and their own experiences.

## 2. Rethinking Negative Stereotypes about People of Color

I love Intergroup so much...I love it...because it made me like, I don't want to say it opened my eyes, that sounds very dramatic, but it made me consider like other people a lot more and...who they are and like why they might do some of the things they do instead of just like, judging people.  
-Jasmine, black, Intergroup participant

Because Intergroup students were in regular contact with those from different racial backgrounds in Intergroup, many of the negative stereotypes they held about each other dissipated (see Chapter 5). In particular, white students reported re-calibrating negative judgments about their black peers. For example, rather than categorizing all black students as ignorant as he once had, Ed, a white student, believed:

*Ed:* ...anyone could act ignorant and anyone could be a good student...Like I used to have Rottweilers and they have a bad image because people used to abuse them and they would attack them you know. And if you get a bad enough reputation then people are obviously gonna look at you, like look at the Rottweiler and say, "Oh that's a bad dog. It's gonna eat you," or something. That's how I always used to look at things.

*Shayla:* And do you feel like there are certain groups of kids at this school that have that kind of reputation?

*Ed:* I think that any black person has it...Like you know like I thought that black kids...thought different like 'cause you see like on TV, they broadcast like blacks are always thinking about killing and all that, when they're really not. They're just...like I thought about it and it's really just skin color. I mean I could be black, you could be white...you didn't get...to choose...I used to think that black girls were just loud and I just didn't like them.

*Shayla:* So what changed your perspective?

*Ed:* Just black girls in my classes and stuff. Like, that girl...Jasmine from our Intergroup session. She's all quiet. It's honestly just the personality of the person...Some girl I hung out with over the weekend was loud and annoying and she's white...I mean Intergroup just helped me...just opened my eyes that were...halfway open.

While Ed was regularly in situations in which his stereotypes about black people were disproven, it was only after having conversations in Intergroup that he paid close enough attention to realize it. Getting to spend time every week with Jasmine—a young lady who challenged what he thought he knew about “black girls”—while talking about race—helped him see the fallacy of his stereotypes. Moreover, Ed had previously believed that

being black was a societal advantage. After Intergroup he was able to recognize the ways in which black students faced disadvantage, and came up with alternative explanations for those things he had previously believed to be privileges. He was moving in the direction of both more critical racial consciousness and overcoming his own prejudice and bias.

Similarly, Nathan—a student who was white and Asian and thought of himself as living up to the “model minority” stereotype—was also rethinking his opinion that black students were not as smart as white and Asian students:

I used to judge people by the way they dressed and present themselves...For example there was somebody (black) who dressed, I guess you'd say urban, and the way he acted was ignorant...But I saw him carrying a pre-calc book and he was in my grade. So I was like wow...just because he acts like that doesn't necessarily mean that...his intelligence is like that. So with that said, if you were to say white people in this school are smarter than black people, it may appear that way but then there might also be a lot of black people that just act the way they do but...they could be smart too.

While Nathan still believed black students, in particular, dressed and acted in ways that made them seem “ignorant,” a year later he was also able to acknowledge that his perceptions may not be accurate. While he was not able to challenge his own cultural biases about what it meant to “act smart,” he was able to see that students might be smarter than he had given them credit for.

Finally, Hailey, a white student who was not interviewed prior to participating in Intergroup, was also thinking about the assumptions she had made about black students:

I've never really had to deal with that because I am white...But like listening to other people, like you always read it in like American History and stuff, but like seeing it and listening to it from other people who have actually experienced it... like the differences that they had to go through because they weren't white or they were a certain race...I felt like the [people who] came in and actually talked about things acted a lot different in Intergroup than they did in the hallways of Jefferson...Because like I mean it's pretty obvious that um, the African Americans just stay in front of like that hallway and just block everything, but then they would come in here, and I would feel like wow, I can actually relate to this person.

Prior to intergroup, Hailey made judgments about black students based on her perceptions of how a segment of black students behaved in the hallways—loud and obnoxious. Although she still did not have a particularly salient racial identity, and

struggled to consider the diversity among African American students, she no longer felt that the differences she witnessed were insurmountable. Moreover, she was able to note the ways in which social pressures to conform affected the behaviors of her peers—and perhaps, herself.

As these examples reveal, students were learning about the ways in which certain groups were unfairly targeted because of their social identities and were also learning that, as Menna put it, “your skin color doesn’t...make you who you are.” This did not mean that they fully grasped structural inequality or fully understood their own stereotypes, but it did mean they were thinking much more critically about their world through the lens of race. Considering the ways in which they were thinking about these things at the beginning of 2009, this change was significant.

### **3. Rethinking Racial Jokes**

Many of the Intergroup students viewed racial jokes very differently after participating in Intergroup. Even those who had previously engaged in racial joking, no longer found them quite as humorous. For example, when asked how he felt about racial humor, Willie said, “I don’t think any of those jokes are funny.” He continued:

*Willie:* Like no one likes to be made fun of because of their race...I mean, I already knew that but I learned that...even though you might be joking, somebody might take it offensively. So I’ve learned just to watch what I say....I don’t think I’ve made a um, racial joke or anything.

*Shayla:* And had you before? Did you used to make racial jokes?

*Willie:* Yeah...but it was like, yeah, but it was just jokes, I was joking around. But I’ve never said anything like racist to hurt someone.

*Shayla:* But since doing intergroup you don’t even do the funny thing anymore?

*Willie:* No.

*Shayla:* Oh, that’s a big change. Has it been hard?

*Willie:* No, it hasn’t been that hard. It’s just like, it’s kinda just like easier....Since we talk about it, it’s always on my mind. Like I’m always thinking about it. So it’s like easy when I be like, “Oh, I shouldn’t say this.” So I just don’t say it.

Willie's transformation was particularly interesting because he highlighted the ways in which his raised consciousness changed his daily behavior. Willie's story indicated that simply talking about these issues with young people has the power to raise their consciousness enough to change their actions—particularly for students like him, who were just going along with the cultural norm of the school.

Other students were made more aware of the existence of racial jokes. Whitney said, “[Intergroup] made me notice things around school more. Like people actually do make a lot of racial jokes. I don't know, I never really noticed, but now I do.” Whitney indicated that she had increased awareness not only of racial jokes, but of many of the hyper-racial interactions happening between students at Jefferson. She realized that while she had presumed Jefferson to be a place where “everyone got along,” there was much happening—often right before her very eyes—that she had been unaware of. Matt similarly admitted, he had initially assumed there were no racial tensions at the school. “Like when I hear stuff about that, like I always think like my first thought is like I'm never around...like I'm never around to hear that,” he said. “But like at the same time I think like maybe I am around, I just don't notice it.” In part, it became clear that Matt had not noticed because he was often the perpetrator of racial jokes—something he was reflecting upon quite seriously a year after our initial conversation.

Matt was the white male student who in the Fall of 2009 had told me a particularly disturbing racial joke. In the Fall of 2010, I asked him what he thought of our original exchange:

*Shayla:* Tell me if I'm wrong, but I'm pretty sure that you told me the joke, how do you stop five black guys from raping a white girl? Throw them a basketball.

*Matt:* Yeah, I did tell you that.

*Shayla:* In this exact room.

*Matt:* In this exact same room.

*Shayla:* What is your perception now of that?

*Matt:* I think I'm sorry.

*Shayla:* What?

*Matt:* I don't know, like I think...I'm sorry for saying that in front of you. It's...I feel like I need to apologize to you now.

When he said this, he seemed thoughtful, serious, and earnest. The comment that had seemed so funny to him a year before, was now something he was embarrassed by—especially because he had said it so eagerly in front of a black adult. He did not justify his joke, nor did he try to explain it away. He simply apologized.

Finally, Raymond, a student who had vigorously defended racial jokes as evidence of “racial progress” in Chapter 4, reported that he was now able to recognize the different tone that black jokes and white jokes took. As he explained:

There's only a few white jokes...It's hard to explain because...white jokes are... it's not to harm the character of a white person... You'll see like white jokes being like, “Why don't you go sell some insurance or something?” Like something that's a, you know, generalization... it's not usually an attack... 'Cause the stereotypes of the... society...that we live in...doesn't portray white as being a bad thing...even the stereotypes they're all good.

This interview with Raymond was much more of a conversation in which I pushed him fairly hard to explain his understanding of the world. The relationship we had developed over the year allowed for this kind of interaction without threatening his feelings of safety. At some point we both forgot I was interviewing him and were, instead, “talking race” like two old friends with differing views. While Raymond's opinions about the acceptability of racial jokes had not shifted all that much, he was able to articulate the ways in which white and black jokes were decidedly different. He was able to explain for himself something that I had pushed him, and his peers, to consider a year before—that white jokes were largely reinforcing positive stereotypes and black jokes were reinforcing negative ones. Because he understood this nuance and had thought about race critically, we could have a riveting discussion about race in which we agreed to disagree.

#### **4. Rethinking Racial Slurs**

One of the dialogue sessions focused primarily on racial slurs. Many students reported that the conversation had given them a new way of thinking about the N-word. For example, both Jasmine and Kwesi, black students, felt that the use of the N-word was more complicated than they had originally thought.

In Chapter 4, Kwesi said he was comfortable with his “cool” white friends calling him the N-word, and reported frequently using it with them. By the next year, Kwesi had rethought his feelings about the word completely. He reported that he personally no longer used the word:

*Kwesi:* First, in the middle of the discussion I was thinking it depends on how you use the word with the ‘er’ and the ‘a’...And, then I think it was Maria who said it, she just said, people should not use it period. So I said that’s a good point, people should not use it period....So I just put it in her point of view....I think it was Willie who said, that’s what they use to call us back in the day...and we didn’t like it and now...like the whites are asking themselves why are they calling themselves the N-word, but they don’t want us to call them the N-word? So it, it creates a whole conflict. So when Maria said we shouldn’t use it period that, I see her sense in that...we shouldn’t use it period, ‘cause it would just stop all of this.

*Shayla:* And you agree?

*Kwesi:* Yeah, I agree....I no longer use it....I used to use it...not the ‘er’ but the ‘a’ one. But I was saying that like I call my friends the N-word and all that, like my white friends I call them the N-word too and they call me the N-word and I had no problem with it, but, I mean, you don’t know, some people might have a problem with it...but they’re just not saying anything so I just stopped using it period.

Kwesi believed a lot of racial tension could be eliminated if confusion over who could say the N-word were no longer an issue. Similarly, although Jasmine still used the N-word, like Kwesi, she was much more ambivalent about the impact it had on the school. She too had a heightened awareness of how white students’ perceived her when she used the word—something she had not thought about previously:

*Jasmine:* I think everyone says the N-word entirely way too much...

*Shayla:* But you still use it?

*Jasmine:* I try not to. The answer’s yes....It’s like, I know people shouldn’t use it, but in reality like being realistic people are going to...‘cause I know I say it... I mean I do the same thing....talk like, “Hey, what’s up my nigger”....I mean I catch myself constantly, I’m just like nig, hmm, and I’ll stop saying it, but I still slip...[it’s] habit.

*Shayla:* So what has made you decide that you should maybe try not to say it?

*Jasmine:* Like it feels like people look at me funny when I say it, like people that aren’t black. Like if I say it and I’m like in a group of people that aren’t my race,

they just look at me funny like did she just say that? Is it okay for us to say it? I don't know. I feel like it just makes people uncomfortable....I think it confuses them. Like, if I say it will she be offended? Can I say it around her? Can I say it at all? Like will I get beat up if I say it?...[So] I'm trying to stop saying it.

Jasmine and Kwesi both reported that hearing the perspective of their peers changed their opinions about the appropriateness of the N-word. It should be noted that as facilitators, we did not present “right” or “wrong” perspectives. Rather, we provided the students with the space to talk openly and honestly about race in ways that they previously had not. In so doing, the diversity of opinions already present in the school, which had been silenced by dominant post-racial narratives, were voiced.

After hearing the perspectives of his black peers, Ed also changed his opinion about the N-word. Ed came from a rural background. Although not currently farmers, he lived in an average sized house on a large plot of land where he regularly rode his four-wheeler for fun. Prior to Intergroup Ed had said he often used the N-word. During one of the dialogue sessions on race, he said that he did not think of the word as a racial slur.

The following exchange in the post-interview highlights Ed's change in thinking:

*Shayla:* So we talked about the N-word in our small group and you said originally that you think about it as applying to anybody really, if you're ignorant and uneducated. And then it came up in the group somehow that even though that might be true...

*Ed:* It was Willie who brought it up....He said, he said it's true...that it could be true in some ways but...people usually direct it more towards the black people than anyone else.

*Shayla:* And what'd you think about that?

*Ed:* I mean honestly it's true. It's true. But I mean like if there's people more of my point of view, then it wouldn't be [true]. But...people seem to focus more on the negative about black people than the positive....I think what it honestly is, is how they used to be slaves and some white people...like the country people who are racists don't want the blacks...they're thinking that blacks are gonna like switch roles and they're gonna rule over the white people and they're afraid, so they just want to...they want to focus on the negative...I think that's how the whole system of...picking on the black people by white people started.

Ed did not have a complete transformation. At different periods between his initial exchange with Willie, and this post-interview, I asked what he thought about the N-word

and he often reverted back to his notion that it applies to anyone “ignorant and uneducated.” However, when reminded of this conversation, Ed was able to re-think his own assumptions. He credited Willie with revealing to him the ways in which the use of the word, whatever the intention, was most often directed at a racial group of people and could not easily be divorced from that group. Moreover, he was able to assess the ways in which contemporary and historical white racism worked to maintain a system in which white people picked on black people in order to retain their own positions of power. It was only through the dialogue with Willie that these things were made apparent to him.

## **5. Rethinking Racial Intimidation and Intergroup Violence**

In addition to changing their perspectives on verbal racial bullying, a few students believed that if done on a larger scale, dialogue also had the potential to decrease physical conflicts between students. Leah, a white student, said:

A lot of kids in our school like have conflict with each other....So like I definitely think that it would help them, the kids to start like being less violent or being less aggressive and just like talking things out and like you know trying to understand where they're coming from...

Madison also agreed that dialogue could decrease physical bullying. She believed that talking about the fight that opened this dissertation made students in Intergroup not only think more critically about race, but also about the senselessness of violent conflict.

Jasmine specifically noted that Intergroup had made her rethink her reactions to pushing and bumping in the hallway. In particular, she was more generous in her assessment of students who bumped into her: “Like instead of like somebody bump me in the hallway, just being like, ‘Oh excuse you, watch where you’re going, blah, blah, blah.’ It’s like, oh, maybe she’s having a bad day, maybe her cat just died or something, I don’t know.” Prior to intergroup if Jasmine were bumped in the hallway she responded in ways that heightened conflict. However, a year later she was less likely to jump to negative conclusions about her peers and less likely to respond in a hostile way.

## **6. Taking Action: Interrupting Discrimination and Racial Bullying**

It’s really fascinating how we’re talking about all these topics that you, like you encounter them every day but you really don’t talk deeply about them....I feel like if we had that group it would change a lot in our school....A lot of people would think differently....on how we treat each other.

-Kwesi, Intergroup participant

The final, and perhaps most significant transformation of students was that many reported being more likely to take action to interrupt the discriminatory comments of their peers. Ed said that when he heard students make fun of each other, “I interrupt people.” While he also noted that this action sometimes caused people “to call me names and stuff,” he said, “it don’t really matter to me ‘cause I don’t really care what people think....I’ll just be like, ‘that’s not nice, that’s not cool, not cool at all.’” Similarly, Whitney said when she heard things, “I always say something...like I just tell them that’s rude or something.” This contrasted with how she used to respond to these sorts of interactions: “I didn’t say things as often as I do know. Before, I would just ignore it.”

Jasmine also did not hesitate to interrupt racial jokes. She described one specific incident:

There’s this kid in my class, oh my gosh, it’s a Spanish class...and like there was a weird word we were pronouncing...and he’s like why isn’t it just [pronounced] how it’s spelled? And [the teacher] is like well that’s just how it’s pronounced. And he was like, “No, it’s because Mexicans are ignorant.” And he made me so mad, I’m like, “Why would you say something that stupid?” He was just like, “I’m just kidding, why are you so mad?” I’m like, “Because you’re just saying really stupid pointless stuff...” The kid made me mad!...He thought it was funny and all his friends like, “Oh ha, ha, ha it’s a joke, it’s funny.” I’m like, “No it’s not funny, it’s stupid, that’s hurtful.”

Jasmine could have easily laughed along with this young man and his friends. However, she did not. Moreover, she also challenged him for making the comment. This is especially encouraging in light of the fact that Jasmine was a black student. In other words, she was not defending her own group, nor was she necessarily defending any particular Mexican students given the very small number of Mexican students at the school. Instead, Jasmine was acting as an ally (Alimo, 2012; Reason, Roosa Millar, & Scales, 2005) and taking a larger stand for social justice.

Willie also gave a very specific example of how and why he was beginning to interrupt racial jokes. He said, “A lot of times you know I might be around a certain group of people and they might be talking about somebody and then I just feel bad. I’ll tell them to stop talking about them. Like it’s not funny and things like that...like she has feelings as well.” Like Ed, Willie mentioned there was a risk involved with taking

such action—namely that other students got upset and in some cases retaliated. However, he believed the risk was worth it. He also said he was able to quickly defend himself when his peers suggested that he was just being too sensitive:

No, it's not that you're just too sensitive. It's like you have feelings just like everybody else. Like...if you just sitting there dogging about black people and then you just like, I mean it may be funny, but it's just like, all right that's enough, you know? You draw the line...you know really it hurts you deep inside 'cause he's like man, he's talking about me.

Willie's story was especially notable because in Chapter 4 he talked about being bothered by racial humor but unsure of how he should respond. He said then that he often felt he should say something, and thought if he did the people making the jokes would stop, but he could not bring himself to do so. A year later, he was not only interrupting this behavior, he was also observing that even those students who got upset with him for doing so did stop making fun of their peers.

Students were not always eager or willing to intervene when they witnessed racial jokes and racial slurs. This was especially true in instances in which a non-black student was overhearing black students use the N-word. Unsurprisingly, like their white teachers, they were both disturbed and unsure about what, if anything, they should do. Nathan talked about his frustrations regarding his inability to say something to his black peers:

I mean really, that kind of, that was one topic that made me kind of irritated...but since it's a black community you can't really, you can't go up to, you could go up to a black person and say don't use that word...they're just going to laugh at you...I mean they don't realize what they're actually saying. They don't realize that they're just discriminating their own kind.

Nathan identified a real conundrum for which there was no perfect answer. As a non-black student he did not feel it would be acceptable for him to tell black students not to use derogatory terms about themselves within their own groups. While this caused him much frustration, it also gave him an opportunity to think deeply about the rules of race and figure out his personal beliefs as well as the limitations to his willingness to intervene.

Although students did not intervene every time they heard a slur or a joke. Willie believed the small group of Intergroup students had already made a change in the school culture, especially in his grade. He explained:

*Willie:* Um, actually I haven't even heard anything about any racist jokes ever since we talked about it. I haven't heard much of it.

*Shayla:* So why do you think that is? Is that coincidence or what? What do you think happened?

*Willie:* Um, I'm not sure. I think, well I think it's kind of coincidence, but then at the same time some people started seeing that it wasn't really funny and then like people in Intergroup I'm sure, I'm sure more people would like tell them to stop or that's not funny or things like that. So I think we have, we kind of had a, I don't know how much of an impact on other people, but we, I think we had some type of impact on them.

It is unclear whether or not the shift Willie witnessed was actually the result of Intergroup students alone. However, it likely did have some effect, if only in terms of the network of students he now considered friends. Arguably, the fact that Willie believed he made an impact was the more important outcome in empowering students to take action and helping them build efficacy around issues of social injustice.

## **7. Intergroup Self: Realizing Student Potential**

Because students felt safe and were being asked to seriously engage in conversation about what they considered “mature” topics, many reported having a double-consciousness or multiple selves (Du Bois & Lewis, 1995). In other words, students’ “intergroup” performances of identity as engaged, thoughtful, attentive students, were often different than those they enacted during the school day—especially black and low-income white male students. Many of the students who were outstanding intergroup participants struggled in every other area of the school day. This was important to note because it indicated that students who teachers might not immediately assume were capable of or interested in having serious and meaningful discussion could do so in the right circumstances. For example, two different black male students who struggled to pay attention in class and were considered “bad” students by many teachers often encouraged the group to “clap it out” at the end of a session or engage in a “group hug.”

Willie described himself as being much more serious in Intergroup:

I mean I'm still me but like it's...more serious in dialogue 'cause you know we are talking about serious subjects so you know it calls for you to be serious you

know in order to get the full effect of you know what we're talking about... You ... have to be mature to talk about these things because you can't just be goofing around not taking it serious 'cause that makes people mad.

Willie not only felt he had to be more serious because the content called for it, but also because it was disrespectful to his peers to goof off. Ed also said he acted differently in Intergroup. "Sometimes, I mean I could be funny... and immature but I know when to be serious and when not to be serious." He said when it came to Intergroup, "I was serious, because I took it seriously. I mean I joked... around but it was mainly serious, the conversations." In contrast, he said in class, "It's not really that serious because I can get my work done and joke around."

Other students said they were more talkative in Intergroup than they were in class because, as Jasmine put it, "I was a lot more comfortable to voice my opinion... 'Cause I felt like people would like understand, or at least try to." Maria a very quiet and rather high achieving student said she also was more likely to speak up in Intergroup:

I don't really talk in my classes. The difference is, in class I think you just need to sit down and learn... [But in Intergroup] I feel like I need to talk more. Because I feel like I can teach people things about the things that I know... I feel like I need to learn... and teach in Intergroup I guess.

In Intergroup we often talked about students and ourselves as "teachers and learners" (Freire, 2000). It was clear that Maria had internalized this message and thought of herself as having things of value to share with the larger group.

Other students noticed that their peers behaved differently in Intergroup than they did during the regular school day. For example, Hailey said she noted, "how people acted with their friends, that they like had no sympathy and didn't really care about people, but then they would come in here and I would just be like, 'Wow, they're not at all what I thought they were.'" When asked to consider why students might behave differently in these different spaces, Hailey said, "I feel like maybe they're putting up a wall and that more people should be in Intergroup so they can be understanding. And like if more people were influenced by Intergroup then maybe it wouldn't end when we left." In other words, Hailey believed, like many of her peers, that if more students at Jefferson participated in Intergroup students would not feel the need to go through their days with walls up or acting as if they did not care when they did. They could be their Intergroup

selves all of the time. What she also suggested was that the effects of Intergroup, for many students, did not last beyond 4PM on Tuesdays.

These reports about how students and their peers were different in intergroup—how they put on their “Intergroup selves”—were particularly interesting in light of the fact that the group of participants were not special in any way. A few were high achieving students, a few were very low achieving students, but most were average. Similarly, throughout the program, a few students were suspended or spent days in In-School Suspension. These students were by no means “super stars.” In fact, many of the most insightful students in the group—like Willie, Whitney, Hailey, Kwesi, and Ed—were not high achieving students at all. They struggled greatly in their classes and sometimes with their teachers. I once observed Kwesi listening to headphones, playing cards, standing up and walking back and forth across the room for an entire math class, and found him in ISS on more than one occasion. Willie and Ed both had horrible grades and had failed many classes. And Hailey, Kwesi, and Whitney did not graduate with their classes.

And yet, in Intergroup they managed to be keen observers of the world around them, able to speak honestly and thoughtfully about their experiences and listen appreciatively and genuinely to their peers—many of whom were different from them and whom they had already formed somewhat negative opinions of. According to Whitney, “Our group isn’t full of the kids that are like goody-goody students... Like there’s all different kinds of students in there and we’re not really out of control... When you guys want our attention, we get quiet.” Like Whitney, Raymond believed the largest difference between how students behaved in Intergroup and how they acted in school was not about who the students were. “We’re just ordinary students,” he said. “Everybody is pretty ordinary. It’s not the students, again, it’s not the students. It’s the teaching... They don’t think we can handle it...” However students were clearly more than capable of handling these conversations. Teachers simply needed the knowledge and skills to give them the opportunity to do so.

## **B. Teachers**

The teacher dialogue also resulted in significant changes in awareness and action. Although most of the teachers were only scraping the surface in their new openness to thinking about race, they were more conscious of these issues at multiple levels of the system. They were more likely to think about how race mattered in their own lives and families, how it mattered for students, how it mattered in their teaching practice, and how it mattered in the school more broadly.

### **1. Raised Awareness of Personal Struggles with Race**

All of the teachers said that as a result of participating in the PD they were more aware of their own race, their own racial history, and how they personally interacted with students and colleagues across and around race. Many of the teachers admitted at some point during the process that they had close friends, family members, or colleagues who used racial slurs or were overtly racist. A few teachers realized their own lives were rather racially homogenous. For example, although Ms. Mitchell thought a lot about race and had been motivated to do the PD because she recognized her own “struggle connecting with certain kinds of kids, particularly...the male black students,” during the workshop she began to wonder how her lack of cross-racial friendships affected her interactions with her students of color:

*Ms. Mitchell:* I think it's always been interesting to me that I don't have black friends you know, not by choice or anything. It's just almost like because of nothing in common more so than anything else. But yeah, I really don't have any good [black] friends in my life. Acquaintances, sure. People I talk to....And I'm just like gosh...but why not? You know...what message am I sending? Am I sending out a vibe? And if I'm sending out a vibe amongst adults, am I sending out a vibe to students?...I think there's merit to the idea that we all are somewhat racist, sexist, ageist you know. We're all of them at different points, depending on different experiences or what happened to us that day, you know.

*Shayla:* Is that something you had always kind of accepted or is this new?

*Ms. Mitchell:* It's kind of a newer realization 'cause I think your first initial response is [denial]....But yeah, yeah, all of us a little bit....Certainly all teachers are ageists at some point (laugh), you know, against teenagers.

In this exchange, Ms. Mitchell was thinking deeply about why her own life had not facilitated more racially diverse friendships and was even willing to admit that she held racial biases. Moreover, she was connecting these observations to the kinds of impressions she may or may not have been leaving on her students.

Ms. McCandless was also beginning to ask herself more probing questions about how race mattered in her own practice. In part, this exploration was prompted by an exchange she had in the group with Naomi in which she said she could not believe teachers treated, graded, or disciplined students differently by race. She explained:

Like I'm still having a hard time.... Naomi, she said, "What if what the students say happened was the truth? What if that is the truth?"...And I'm still fighting that...but I can see how that question would be very helpful in a lot of areas....What if it is true? What if I was unfair? What if?...I don't even know. But that's one of the things I'm taking away.

Ms. McCandless was still not sure she believed race affected school outcomes because that would mean that the school system was racially biased and moreover, that she might be—something very difficult for her to consider. However rather than simply denying the possibility Ms. McCandless was thinking about how that question alone could reveal much about her practice and the experiences of her students.

By the end of the training, Ms. McCandless realized that, like Ms. Mitchell, she felt rather clueless in terms of how to handle her black male students:

I have one class every year that's like this...group of African American boys who are crazy and they call themselves out...and I just deal with it, and they know I love them and we just get through the year. But I always know that there's something that I should be dealing with. Like what can I do? And there's this book I keep meaning to find that's titled, *White Teachers and African American...White Female Teachers and African American Male Students* or something like that. It's like, I need that book... 'cause...I feel like they just bulldoze my whole class. They just take over and I don't get mad or I'm not bitter about it, but at the same time I'm not thinking, well, this is their culture...

While Ms. McCandless did not have negative interactions with these young men, she did not feel that she was able to effectively manage her class when groups of black boys were present, nor did she feel she was giving these students what they needed academically. By the end of the PD she felt no more competent, but was more aware that she needed additional support to improve her practice.

Finally, Ms. Flournoy, a teacher who had grown up in the area and attended Jefferson High School, said that the PD raised her awareness of the racial issues in her own high school experience, which mirrored those faced by her current students. In particular, she talked about her changing view of racial segregation:

I know that [race] is a factor here....'cause I grew up on these back dirt roads...So when it came to the bus, the back half would be all white, and the front half would be all black in the morning. In the afternoon when we got on the bus, the back half would be all black and the front half would be all white. We all get along, we all know each other....we never had any problems, it was never any confrontations. It was just like they say you know at the lunch tables...you got the black table, the white table, they get along....So I knew that there was some things...I just didn't have quite the perspective of how bad it was. I thought we were more of a blended community [now] than what we really are....I think that there probably was a problem [then], but I was just naïve to it.

Hearing the stories of the students in the joint session had really made Ms. Flournoy reflect more on her own time as a high schooler at Jefferson. She was beginning to think that perhaps there were problems that she was oblivious to, that perhaps she was doing, saying, and thinking things that were problematic, and that perhaps not as much progress had been made in student race relations as she had hoped.

## **2. Raised Awareness of Race at the School-Level**

### **a. The Power of Data: Understanding Demographics and Disparities**

I would like to see more risk, whether it's race based or not. I guess to actually look at data and be willing to admit that what we're doing isn't as effective as it could be. I want us to acknowledge that everybody is doing their best. And that maybe if we communicate, our best will be different than it is this year. So...I don't know what it's going to [take] to get there, but I, I still have hope that with enough persistence we will...

-Ms. McWilliams

In the first session, I provided teachers with a data summary of the school that included basic demographic information, graduation rates, standardized test scores, and suspensions by race and gender, and a quick summary of the school climate and culture gathered through ethnographic participant observation and interviews. While this data seemed rather basic to me, the teachers had never received such information about their school. This 2-page handout alone sparked much conversation and provided a number of

opportunities for teachers to begin thinking differently about identities and social justice at Jefferson.

For example, when asked what some of the most helpful parts of the PD were, Ms. Mitchell said, “One of the things I found really useful was just the knowledge of those demographics. Those stats that you gave, which were really eye-opening to me....I kind of knew but just to have the actual numbers...” In particular, she had thought a lot about achievement and graduation rates. As she explained:

One thing I found interesting is that the black students are graduating at a higher rate but their grades overall are lower. And um and that many of the black students are of a higher economic demographic than many of our white students, which I kind of figured but again, reassuring to have it in an actual you know confirmation....I think it just really verified for me that we have a unique situation here and that many of our problems are not the causes but more the effects. They’re symptoms of something larger and nobody ever wants to talk about it.

This information was both eye-opening and validating for her. More importantly it made her interested in thinking about the *why* behind the numbers.

According to Ms. Flournoy, the data was, “...a little surprising. It was. I didn’t really get it. I just didn’t understand why there was huge gaps in many of the data. I mean it’s like whoosh....Like, the population of Jefferson is what, 30% black or somewhere around there, but the referrals are 60 or 70? Whoa! (flabbergasted) that’s a huge difference.” While she was not exactly sure why there were disparities or what should be done about it, she went from having no awareness of what was happening around race in these areas to being able to think more critically about the problems faced by the school.

Ms. McWilliams responded similarly:

So I’m still not having wrapped my head around what all [this] entails, but having the data that you provided gives me a baseline for understanding all the different at-risk categories and big picture of what that implies. And maybe the interventions that I’m suggesting recommending need to be more teacher-based, some of them, because if realistically kids aren’t bothering to try because they don’t feel cared for, invested [in], and supported, I think that’s the one thing I got that was a vague like whoa, ah-hah feeling.

While the data did not indicate any “causes” for the disparities, the conversations that the data triggered led Ms. McWilliams to see the ways in which the relationships between students and teachers across race likely had some relevance to how particular subgroups

of students were performing academically—especially important because she was someone who struggled greatly in this area (see Chapter 6). Previously, when she thought of how to intervene with her at-risk students Ms. McWilliams had assumed that the students alone were in need of additional support. After the PD she was beginning to think about the ways in which teachers contributed to the academic outcomes of students as well and the need to provide them with support and guidance. Moreover, she was seeing the ways in which wrestling with these issues collectively led to alternative perspectives and analyses and had the potential to lead to more effective solutions.

This was the first time they were having conversations about disparities in their school at this level. According to Ms. McWilliams while teachers obviously had access to the same data I had given them, “If I just tell you data’s out there [the expectation is] you’ll do it on your own time and you’ll figure it all out for yourself right? [But] we’re busy and we need to go on to the next thing.” She saw providing teachers with more specific data and then posing provoking questions around the data in a collaborative setting as we did in the training as a method of intervention. This relatively simple act had led her to begin asking questions like, “Okay, so why is it like this and what are we going to do about it?”

Ultimately, data was useful because it served to interrupt willful ignorance and other colorblind strategies. Because they had “the numbers” it became much more difficult for teachers to make some of the colorblind claims they previously had. For example, Ms. Mitchell said, “I just think it’s the unspoken. You know even teachers who feel like there are certain racist administration who favor black students over white...but the numbers don’t really bear that out. But there’s that perception.” Because of her newfound understanding of the differential achievement and discipline among students at Jefferson, Ms. Mitchell was able to challenge beliefs that the administration favored black students. Similarly, Ms. Gorski was able to verbalize the ways in which teachers, including himself, often used class as a mechanism for avoiding conversations about race. In the following exchange, she began by suggesting that race was no longer as big an issue as class. However, by the end of his comments, she recognized class as a colorblind frame often invoked to make teachers more comfortable:

I know you were focusing on racism, but I think class is like...I think it's the class because...I don't think anybody's really racist against Tiger Woods or you know or Motown or anybody...But, of course, I guess that was racist when they said that Mr. Williams brought race in so (see Chapter 3)...I think it's easier to practice classism than racism because you know, I work for this...but classism keeps racism outside I guess...Because white teachers, well anybody's going to be more comfortable with classism than racism...

Ms. Gorski observed the ways in which class was an easier kind of bias to justify. Because our society is one in which class is thought to be “earned” it was easier for teachers to revert to using class-based analyses—a phenomenon explored more fully in Chapter 6. Interestingly, by the end of the PD, Ms. Gorski was able to recognize the ways in which this happened, and how she was likely to fall back on class as an explanatory framework in order to make herself more comfortable.

In addition to acknowledging the ways in which data revealed something about race in their schools, teachers were also becoming more conscious of how the daily interactions of adults and students reinforced the notion that black students were “problems.” Ms. Mitchell noted:

I don't think it helps that at 3:00pm somebody gets on the PA and says, basically get the fuck out of the building...you know in a mean tone. And you know who's usually in the building at that time, in the main hallway, that are being directly spoken to that way?...I don't think I need to [tell you]. You already know. If you walk down there it's 99% black students in the hallways....I don't know if they're waiting for Credit Recovery, waiting for a ride, waiting for parents to get home, waiting for a sibling. I mean there's numerous reasons...maybe they don't want to go home. I have no idea....But...you know when people talk like that and we know it's directed at a certain group and it seems like it's because of mistrust, I don't see how you can interpret it otherwise.

In many ways Ms. Mitchell's observation was an even more nuanced analysis of race. It was not based on numbers or data, but instead on the subtle ways in which she noticed afterschool discipline was racially coded, despite being seemingly colorblind. She was observing who was in the hallways afterschool, thinking about why they might be there, listening to how they were being talked to, and making connections to their overall treatment in the school community.

## **b. They Don't All Get Along!: Raised Awareness of Student Racial Interactions**

Teachers very much appreciated the opportunity to have conversations about race with some of their students—something most of them had never had before. As Ms. Brown described, “What I found useful, well, right away was the contact with the kids, because it’s hands-on basically.” All the teachers said that this session gave them the most insight about what Jefferson students were dealing with in terms of race relations. Ms. Gorski said, “I like listening to the kids. You know what was nice about it is when the kids talk to the teachers, that’s what’s important, you know. Not everybody can have the big personality and talk to all the kids. I don’t think people have enough energy to do it. Not for 1700 kids, but just an honest...conversation because we see them as our enemies, I swear to God.” While she acknowledged this was a rare opportunity, and one that most teachers did not have the time or ability to do for themselves, she also believed that connecting with students in this way was essential to overcoming many of the barriers and misunderstandings between students and teachers.

Much of what students revealed about the racial segregation of the school and the racial tensions between students was new to teachers who had little knowledge of the interactions of their students across race prior to the PD. In fact, most of the teachers were shocked and horrified by students’ revelations that the cafeterias were racially segregated. As Ms. Flournoy put it, “...I don’t go to the cafeteria. I had no idea...I thought that the students were assigned. I didn’t know that they were allowed to go to any cafeteria.” The cafeteria segregation was also new information for Ms. Gorski who struggled with what teachers’ roles were in the phenomenon. When asked if she knew about the cafeterias she responded:

*Ms. Gorski:* No, I didn’t know that. I thought, I thought it was just...I don’t even know what’s going on in the lunchrooms, you know....But I mean...which of the issues...are just student issues? And which ones are factored in by the teachers you know. I mean do we teach them to be racist? I don’t know.

*Shayla:* Did you teach them not to be?

*Ms. Gorski:* Well can you? I mean that would be modeling right? So...teachers have to be fair to all of the students right?...But kids are smart. They can tell when somebody says, you know, “Well I expected that of you.” They know it. So

I don't know, I don't know how the teachers can [un]teach racism if they're racists themselves, you know.

*Shayla:* And you think some of the teachers are?

*Ms. Gorski:* Yeah. Yeah....Same as me, at least the same as me. At least I've let go of some of it.

While the cafeteria segregation was new to Ms. Gorski, she was able to connect her newfound awareness of teacher bias. Again, while she was initially inclined to use the colorblind frame for normalizing and minimizing student segregation by claiming that these were “student” issues that adults were neither responsible for creating nor responsible for fixing, she ultimately took a much more structural approach and argued that it was not possible to educate students to be racially tolerant if teachers, like herself, were racially biased.

Teachers were not simply more aware of the fact that students were racially segregated, they were also thinking more critically about what racial segregation meant and whether or not it was a problem. Initially, when they discovered cafeteria segregation, they saw it as “the problem” when it came to student race relations. By the end of the PD they were able to think “beyond segregation.” Ms. Mitchell explained, “The cafeteria information was very interesting to me....I never really thought about it from a point of view of that it's not...that's it's not the problem, it's the symptom and that there's something larger going on. And now I'm very curious as to what that is and how to infiltrate that.” By shifting her perspective slightly to think about all of the factors that had to be in place to lead to segregated cafeterias, Ms. Mitchell was empowered to begin considering how to “infiltrate” a larger system or inequality that was plaguing the school.

Teachers were also paying closer attention to racial tensions and conflicts between students. Ms. McCandless often gave her students journal assignments. By the end of the PD she realized that a white female student in her class had been having particularly biased feelings about a black male classmate, which she expressed in her journal. Ms. McCandless said, “I was reading a notebook this morning by a girl and I knew that she was frustrated with this boy behind her but she was writing about how she feels like she's being racist now.” She offered to read some of the entry:

*Ms. McCandless:* (reading) “Okay, I’m starting to feel extremely racist, which is bad. Reading and listening to improper English is so annoying.” We had two novels where the dialect was...southern. (reading) “I’m tired of having ‘dat...I’m tired of hearing ‘dat, (like that) and n-i-g-g-a. Stop using the N-word and get a dictionary! (all caps) Oh and...whatever your name is, stop farting! It’s f-ing disgusting...I’m pretty tired of learning about slavery and racism in early America. Every year we read about the black people that were brought here as slaves. I don’t think it’s right that slavery ever happened, but we dread on the past far too much...Mainly I think I’m just sick of the ignorance in this school, which mainly comes from the black students. Of course there are plenty of obnoxious white kids also. I understand that slavery and discrimination has caused this cycle of low class and underprivileged African Americans, but none of us were involved in slavery. Now we must move on and work together to make a strong community”...This is a sweet little girl. I was like what? Whoa!...And that was back, like I said on the 6th. And then over here on the 26<sup>th</sup>, yesterday, the 26th she just turned around and swore at him and yelled at him and she doesn’t yell. She hardly talks.

*Shayla:* So you said when you read that you feel like you still didn’t know how to respond to her.

*Ms. McCandless:* I didn’t know what to say to her...I did not think of it as a racial thing until she pointed it out...I thought of it as an immature little boy thing...and...he’s always bringing up racial stuff in class, and because the kids who were laughing with him are black too, I guess.

*Shayla:* So then do you think this is common, this sentiment that this young lady wrote about? She said she’s tired of talking about slavery all the time.

*Ms. McCandless:* I don’t know. I think it’s common, but that most people are not willing to say anything.

*Shayla:* So maybe the teachers and the students feel the way that this young lady wrote down?

*Ms. McCandless:* Yeah, yeah.

The journal excerpts Ms. McCandless shared were a learning opportunity for her in two ways. First, they raised her awareness of the things we had been talking about in the PD. She was seeing first-hand the ways in which seemingly “sweet” and “mild-mannered” white students were harboring racial biases that Ms. McCandless admittedly struggled with as well. Secondly, Ms. McCandless was recognizing her own limitations as a teacher. She believed if she had realized earlier what was going on she would have done

something, but she was very unclear about what that “something” was. Her initial reaction was to treat it as an issue of maturity and ask the young man to “stop farting.” However, she was realizing that this was not enough to address the underlying racial tensions that had mediated the interaction. In turn, in becoming more aware of students’ interactions across race, teachers were inevitably turning a critical eye toward their own responses to these interactions.

### **3. Taking Action**

In addition to raised awareness, teachers also reported changes in their own behavior. In particular, they reported being more likely to interrupt racial bullying when they witnessed it and taking steps to incorporate race into their curriculum more proactively.

#### **a. Intervening in Racial Bullying**

The teacher who had the most significant personal transformation when it came to intervening in racial bullying was Ms. Flourney. Her transformation was sparked by Khalif, an Arab American student whose older brother was Salim and who, unbeknownst to me, had been in Ms. Flourney’s 7<sup>th</sup> grade class. During the joint student/teacher session, Khalif recounted a story to the group in which he had been bullied and harassed by his peers in Ms. Flourney’s class for being of middle-eastern decent. He looked Ms. Flourney in the eye and said that what had been most disturbing to him was that she had done nothing—a truth that horrified her. In the following excerpt Ms. Flourney revealed what that realization was like for her:

*Ms. Flourney:* Talking with...the group and the other teachers and...opening my eyes and opening my ears, just those few weeks, I saw a lot more that I just must have let go over my head. Like when Khalif came in, he was in my 7th grade. And I remember them saying things like that [about him being a terrorist]. I felt sooo bad!

*Shayla:* What did you think about it when he was in 7th grade?

*Ms. Flourney:* ‘Cause he was laughing it off. I actually have...(gets up to find phone, brings it back and shows me a 4-year old picture of Khalif)... There he is in 7th grade!...But he was wrapped up, with the [keffiyeh]....They were kind of like, joking around with him and doing this and that. So to me I just thought they

were all joking around. It's kind of funny I still have that thing....I didn't get it...I just didn't get it.

*Shayla:* So what do you think about it now? So what did you learn, I guess, about him and that situation and how he feels about it, that you didn't get [it]?

*Ms. Flourney:* They hurt him. And then he learned to develop a defense mechanism by being very well versed in sarcasm.

Amazingly, she still had on her phone the picture of Khalif from four years before sitting in class, wrapped in a Keffiyeh. Almost by osmosis she had kept that picture, one of the very few she had on her phone, of the day when she had done nothing. Ms. Flourney realized that there had been many things she had let go over her head, not necessarily intentionally, but because it was easier to assume that if students were laughing, nothing was wrong, rather than deal with what it would mean if the laughter was a cover for a deeper pain and a deeper bias.

This exchange transformed how Ms. Flourney responded to racial joking between students. The same week that she made this discovery, another opportunity presented itself for her to interrupt racial bullying. She responded very differently than she ever had:

*Ms. Flourney:* I don't know if you recall when um...Osama bin Laden [died] and I told you the story about [a] student...telling Mohammad across the room, "Well I'm sorry for your loss." And I could just see Mohammad's face....It was a boy who is mixed, he's Japanese and Korean, and then another boy who is a black boy. And they're both making comments to him, so you got three races making comments. Oh, boy! And I took them in the hall and just said, you know, that's totally racist. "Oh, he's our friend, we're just joking, and he knows we're joking." I said, "That would hurt me!" I kind of yelled at them a little bit. But then they came out and they apologized. So...like I said, it was Khalif who brought that to my attention and I looked right into Mohammad's eyes and I could see that he's not liking this...I think I would have, I...may have not said anything before....I may have said, "Guys, just stop." That's what I may have said then. And then would have continued on what I was doing. This time I made a point of it. "No. This is racist."

*Shayla:* How did you feel about yourself?

*Ms. Flourney:* Well, I felt kind of good. But then I felt bad that this is the first time I did it. That I didn't have, that it didn't click in the past.

*Shayla:* I felt very proud of you. I thought that that was, I thought it was so excellent.

*Ms. Flourney:* Thank you. Well, this is what you accomplished by opening our eyes!...I was being naïve. Stupid....But...ignorance is bliss. No. Not bliss but, you're just scared. You can be ignorant about things. You don't mean to be. But you just don't know and you don't look at it that way. So if no one has brought it to your attention, that's why it's called Professional Development....You're always learning. Doesn't mean I was racist....I mean, you know, you make mistakes.

Ms. Flourney immediately applied what she had been made aware of by her former student in the dialogue group to her current teaching. Rather than writing off what had happened as no big deal, ignoring it, or taking the neutral approach and simply telling the students to “just stop”—all very common responses of teachers at Jefferson to these kinds of incidents—she directly addressed the racist nature of the comment made. She interrupted a reproductive cycle.

#### **b. Redesigning Curriculum, Rethinking Pedagogy**

In addition to interrupting racial bullying, teachers were also thinking proactively about how to incorporate issues of race and multiculturalism into their curriculum, and how they might engage students in conversations about race. All of them made some kind of change to their courses. Ms. Stovall asked if I would come to all of her 9<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms during the Civil Rights unit to do one-time dialogues with students about race. She helped them come up with their own “Ground Rules” in advance of the session. The day of, the students, Ms. Stovall and I sat in chairs in a circle and talked about race relations in the school, in much the way I had done with students in Intergroup. Although these students were a bit younger than the Intergroup participants, the conversations were riveting and engaging. Afterwards, Ms. Stovall and I talked about how she might facilitate such conversations in the future on her own using some of the techniques I had modeled.

Other teachers began making changes to their curriculum and assignments. For example, when teaching advanced students some years before, Ms. Mitchell had done a full class-session on the N-word. Recalling the lesson she said, “It was probably the only day in 12 years that I really felt like there was teaching and learning and exchanging, and

it was like the perfect day. And it was surrounding that topic.” Nonetheless, she had not done it again since, in large part because she had believed her regular students were not mature enough to handle the conversation. However, after the PD she changed her mind. At the time of the post interview, working in collaboration with another teacher she was:

developing a curriculum for a new class....One of the major units is the cause and effect and there’s an ACT writing prompt that we’re going to be doing... There’s an article called “The Black Table is Still There.” It’s about somebody going back years later to their junior high...and there was a black table and now it’s still there. And so we take it a step further and there’s not just a black table, there’s a black cafeteria. And so you know one of the writing assignment or options will be to write a cause and effect. The cafeteria thing, is it the cause or is it the effect and then trying to find the solutions so...that’s gonna be one of the paper options.

*Shayla:* That’s great. I mean I think that’s like a perfect example of how you really take the curriculum that’s already there and just incorporate...this kind of stuff.

*Ms. Mithcell:* That’s what we’re doing, is we’re taking these topics, these hot button topics and incorporating them, finding essays and articles and things for the students to read, but also then we’re teaching grammar, we’re teaching writing, we’re teaching argument, we’re teaching all these things using these, but all of these um topics that kids need to know about and write about and think about and that really aren’t talked about.

*Shayla:*...So was that something you would have thought to do before the students came to speak in terms of the cafeteria as a topic?

*Ms. Mithcell:* It wouldn’t have been in the forefront of my mind as a cause and effect paper because I didn’t even think of it as being an effect rather than a cause and I think that can really open up a conversation in a classroom you know using that article to kind of have that discussion and then have them figure it out....So I am taking things from that and you know applying.

Other teachers were thinking about how to be more effective in the work they were already doing in their classroom. For example, Ms. McCandless often started out her classes with a thought provoking journal assignment and share out. Through the PD she realized areas where she could improve what she was already doing:

I used to think that I was able to talk about race and I felt like I was kind of into that zone more than other teachers because of...the topics of our novels. But then when I had that one class I felt, I don’t know...I was willing to take the risk to kind of change it a little bit and say, I know we talk about race a lot but how do you feel about talking about race? And so...having that be a blowup where some

kids say they don't like it at all and they hate it and they feel yucky and then the different opinions, and then bringing up lists of slurs and ugh, like I just...I recognize that there's a difference between talking about the literature and talking about how we feel about talking about the literature.

What Ms. McCandless was observing was something that students had already noted in previous chapters. Although she was one of the teachers in the school most likely to invite discussion about race in her classroom, these conversations were not dialogues. When she actually attempted to push them to think about race more deeply than simply reading a journal entry or directing their opinions at her without engaging with or responding to one another, she realized that she was not as adept as she had previously believed. When asked how this revelation would affect her teaching in the future she said:

I just need to set ground rules better, but I'm not sure how to do that and I don't feel very confident about it...I feel like I haven't done a good enough job proactively preparing students for issues that might come up...It made me feel like I need to do a better job of starting class and ending class... 'cause you had strategies. We're gonna open with this and we're all gonna do this and then get into something for the center time and then it's time for the wrap-up... and I don't do that anymore...I know I'm supposed to and I have done it in the past...But it's about making people feel comfortable and like they got something worthwhile. It's a closure. I don't do closure...The hopes and fears [activity we did in the PD] to start things off, I would love to do that somehow.

In turn, much of what Ms. McCandless took away from the PD were skills and techniques she could use to more effectively facilitate conversations she was already having with her students.

By the end of the PD, Ms. McWilliams was brainstorming all kinds of potential ways race could be incorporated into the school day. She said:

There are at least eight ways that we can [incorporate this] into what we're already doing...Have the kids do more meaningful right things so that we can then teach them about structure on a topic that they care about. Analyzing this particular data, I'm sure kids would find this extremely interesting so in a stats class or whatever. There are lots of ways that we can weave it in...I think it could be done.

While she was still in the brainstorming stages of thinking about incorporation, it was clear just in this small excerpt that Ms. McWilliams was able to easily come up with a

few specific ways that teachers in multiple subject areas could engage students in relevant course content that also addressed issues of social justice.

#### **4. Building a Community of Practice**

The final outcome of the teacher professional development was that the seven teachers who participated felt as though they were beginning to build a community of practice with like-minded colleagues. All of the teacher participants reported that through the PD they had built a new relationship with at least one other colleague whom they felt comfortable going to if issues of race came up. In fact, by the time of the post-interview, most of the teachers had already done so. Ms. Gorski had talked to Ms. Flournoy about her new assignment and Ms. McWilliams had gone to Ms. McCandless to get her perspective about particular issues. Ms. Brown was particularly surprised by these new relationships because for her entire career at Jefferson she had been most likely to go to her good friend who taught in the classroom next door. However after the PD she said:

I haven't talked to [her] that much actually about what we were doing in this PD hours so, Ms. Stovall would know more than what she does.... I've known [her] for 10 years but I would not go to her first, is interesting in a way because then you want to deal with people who...have experienced the same experience as you in that matter.

Beyond issues of race, the teachers reported they felt like they knew each other better as colleagues and were working toward having more trusting relationships—at least among the group. They were starting to respect each other, have compassion for those peers who they had previously judged negatively, and value one another's opinions, perspectives and experiences. This outcome was particularly notable because almost all of the teachers in the PD had also reported feeling that they worked in a hostile climate, that they did not feel connected to their colleagues, and, in a number of cases, that the hostility among adults was so bad they avoided eating in the teachers' lounge with their colleagues. As Ms. McCandless said, "I can see the potential for something like this to bring us a lot closer."

#### **IV. THE DESIRE FOR MORE**

I guess what I feel like is that I should know what to do now but I still don't. There. Not that I think I should've gotten everything I needed to know out of 5 weeks, but I just think that I kind of have this feeling

that if I had paid more attention or if I had developed...if I go back and read everything that I've ever gotten in college and otherwise, with this new frame of mind...I feel like I could really make a difference.  
-Ms. McCandless

I wish we had more time.  
-Ms. Gorski

By the end of the teacher and student programs both groups were requesting more. They wanted to spend more time together, they wanted to continue thinking about and talking about these issues in a safe and facilitated space with the community we had formed, and they wanted more direction about what to do. Students wanted to know *how* to change the culture of their school and their interactions with their peers, and teachers wanted to know *how* to deal with their specific challenges and *how* to incorporate race into their particular content.

#### **A. Students**

I wish we had classes like that...it would be sweet.  
-Danny, Intergroup Participant

Students were eager to think of ways to do more dialogue. They wanted to meet with the principal and superintendent to talk about how much they got out of the program<sup>56</sup> and wanted to share their experience with as many other teachers and students as possible. As Kwesi said, "If they sit down and took an hour from their time and listened to us...I'm telling you, everybody would fall in love with this program because there's no way you're not learning something....I would definitely sit in front of a whole...auditorium full of teachers and let them listen to what I think on race." In fact, a number of students said that they thought the best way to expand the program would be to make it a class. Kwesi continued:

I feel like we should have a class. I just feel like everybody should be exposed to this, everybody in school should be exposed to this kind of program in some kind of way....This is very important to learn because this could all tie into how we deal with each other in the world....This could be put in our curriculum, like this should be a separate class on, they should even call this like 'life issues.' I'm, I'm telling you this is great.

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<sup>56</sup> During the summer each year, a group of students was invited to the annual superintendent's meeting in which they had the opportunity to share their experience with their district and school administrators. Kwesi and Jasmine both did so in the summer of 2010.

Although not all of the students were as enthusiastic, Kwesi was not alone. Leah said that she learned more in intergroup that was relevant to her post-high school life than in all of her academic classes combined in four years. She continued coming to Intergroup every week the year after she graduated from high school.

A lot of what students loved about intergroup was, as Maria explained, “It related to everyday life and then it related to even longer, like years from now.” For most all of the students Intergroup was the only place in their lives where they were having these conversations. As Whitney explained, “It’s really nowhere else that people are gonna talk about this stuff, like you’re not doing it in class. A lot of people don’t talk about it with their friends or at home and stuff.” She worried that if the school did not support the program more actively, students were not going to have any space to explore issues of race and identity. Similarly, Nathan said, “I guess you kind of need Intergroup in a way because that’s not something you really have a chance to discuss in school....A lot of students need Intergroup to enlighten themselves. ‘Cause a lot of students here are, not just close-minded, but are ignorant in that fact....like they only know what they were told.” He worried that if adults and teachers did not provide opportunities for such “enlightenment” his generation of young people would go out into the world believing that the hyper-racial ways in which they were interacting were acceptable.

While Intergroup did not become a class in the time that I worked at Jefferson, it did have a larger impact in the students’ lives. In fact, many students reported being more likely to engage in intergroup related content with friends and family members. Maria talked about sitting down with her family to talk about race for the first time, Nathan talked about talking to his girlfriend about religion, and Ed said he talked to another white male friend about race and sexual orientation. In this way, Intergroup was touching many more students than those who were in the group.

## **B. Teachers**

While the five PD sessions had made teachers more comfortable talking and thinking about race, and had given them permission to move beyond colorblind frames, most of them felt, rather accurately, that they were only just beginning to get what they needed in order to transform their classrooms. They were particularly interested in having

more time to debrief specific incidents with students and lean more practical activities, techniques, and skills that they could use to deal more effectively with race. Ms. Mitchell captured this sentiment:

I mean I think a lot of us would have liked to have gone on longer you know even as it was because I think we were just starting to get to that comfort level. I think that we had a lot more questions and situations and I think spending more time kind of addressing people's individual...you know working on their individual issues in the classroom.

Ms. McCandless said that she found the “practical classroom activities” that we modeled exciting but that she also wanted more. “Like I’d like a book of whatever it is you guys have,” she said. “To make my classroom more like...incorporating dialogue.” Moreover, she wanted us to do an additional PD series on “teaching how to have discussion” so that she was better equipped to “prepare my classes for how to handle if somebody says something you don’t like.” When I asked what her vision was for the future she responded, “Gosh, I think Intergroup for teachers!...I can picture 11 weeks of Intergroup for teachers, once a week.” She said if something like this were offered in the district, she would be committed to participating. Moreover she would be willing to do readings and additional assignments.

In an effort to continue this work many of the teachers began independently brainstorming how I could be involved at Jefferson beyond the dissertation work they knew I was concluding. For example, Ms. Brown advocated for involving more teachers in the project over multiple years, and perhaps integrating some more structured dialogue between teachers and students. However, while she thought that they should continue work of this sort, she worried about who was going to take initiative to lead this effort. “Okay, in everything that you do...someone [has] to volunteer to be the leader,” she said. “And I think this is what we don’t have. Who is going to take care of this?...Somebody had to initiate this. Like I was saying like, are you here next year or not?” This was a frequent question in the post-interviews. Teachers kept asking if I was going to continue to work in the district; if I was going to do another round of professional development; and if I would be available to help them with any issues that might arise in the future. In fact, Ms. McWilliams said, “I don’t know where your research is going to go, where you’re headed with all of this, I would like to see that unfold....You know I would like to

have an actually paid position to do this.” She was thinking of ways the district could create a full-time position for me, or someone like me, to help them with issues of diversity permanently.

These requests and suggestions were very flattering, but were really indicative of the larger struggles to doing this work in schools. While I was excited about the work I did with teachers and students, it was not particularly unique in the world of social justice education and intergroup dialogue. In fact, I often worried that I had “watered” things down too much. In other words, giving teachers and students an opportunity to have discussion, some structure, a little data, and some probing questions felt to them like an amazing experience.

Moreover, teachers’ fear that if I were no longer around to make this work a priority it would fall by the wayside, was rooted in their awareness of the many ways they were being stretched throughout the day to do more with less support, as well as their knowledge and awareness of how these issues had been so effectively silenced in the district prior to my involvement. They also realized that what had happened in this group over a series of weeks was something uncommon in school reform and professional development. They especially appreciated that the content was so specific to their school. Although much of what we covered would have been applicable to any integrated U.S. school, because they were provided with demographic information about their particular institution and were given the opportunity to speak with their students in a small group setting, it felt more relevant. Ms. Flournoy explained her feelings:

The fact [of] it being in my school. It’s totally different than me going to take a workshop...where they’re talking about the general population. I mean you were able to bring statistics to us. And show us different things. Bring students to us. So we could see it. So it was more. I just like it a lot better that way. That’s why I think at the end of our last session, I was asking you if you plan on doing this again next year.

Although the hours were not all that different than their regular professional development sessions, by spreading them out over time and giving teachers an opportunity to reflect on their experiences, observe their classrooms, and then put some of the things learned into practice, they were more likely to make impactful change.

Finally, teachers appreciated the opportunity to talk to each other in small groups rather than being trained in large auditoriums where they were not given the opportunity to discuss what they were learning or get to know each other better. Ms. Gorski said:

I think in order for it to be really effective, they should get rid of these pep talk type professional development things...and just have, you know, thrown in about three or four of you and then take them in small groups, you know.

She believed that more change could be made at the school level if teachers continued to have opportunities to collaborate in groups of this sort around issues of diversity with trained facilitators.

## **V. CONCLUSION: A SPACE IS NEEDED**

The seven teachers at Jefferson High School who participated in the teacher professional development workshop were beginning to develop the skills and knowledge to be more effective, socially just educators. By the end of the PD sessions, teachers were more comfortable talking about race, they were more aware of their own racial biases, and they were more aware of the ways in which their students were interacting around race. Moreover, they were more willing and able to intervene in racial bullying and consider race in their own teaching practice. While the training was by no means perfect, and teachers were only just *beginning* to feel comfortable talking openly about race, the workshop did show the potential of dialogue to help teachers interrupt and challenge the reproductive cycles of creating and allowing inequitable classrooms and school systems.

In addition, by doing the training teachers were gaining credibility with their students. According to Ms. Brown the students were impressed by the fact that their teachers were participating in dialogue:

Actually, you know Tom, who is in your group?...He said something about “Oh, you know, that’s pretty cool.” You know...that actually the teachers are in there with part of the group. That my teacher is actually doing this too....He was happy. So it’s nice for the kids also to see their response, “Oh, they are interested in us also.” Which is also, of course the main point.

This was particularly important because there were such huge misunderstandings and miscommunications between students and teachers—especially around issues of race.

Similarly, the twenty student participants felt they were getting something in Intergroup that they were not being provided with in traditional classroom settings. They

were more aware of the ways in which their own interactions around race were problematic and more willing and able to interrupt the discrimination they witnessed. Moreover, they were thinking much more critically about race and social justice.

This project happened on a fairly small scale, with a relatively small group of teachers and students. The outcomes were not universal, nor were they always sustained. Consequently, what is presented in this chapter is not meant to be an exhaustive analysis of the outcomes of the program. Rather, it seeks to provide some examples of the promise of critical methods of education that, to those who study race and education, might seem like simple solutions, but for teachers and students can be life changing. For individuals who have never talked about race before, having the opportunity to do so successfully, even for a few hours was enough to motivate them to begin thinking about their role in interrupting bias in schools. These findings suggest that there is a need for students and teachers to have more opportunities to engage in dialogue about social identities and injustice. Restructuring professional development and providing afterschool programming was one example of how it could be done.

Both teachers and students believed that in order for this work to happen in a more systematic and sustained way there would need to be an initiative from the top down. Over and over again, teachers said they were interested in learning more but that they simply were not in positions to make this happen at a school-wide level. Similarly, students worried that if Intergroup ceased to exist there would be no other place where they could have these conversations. As Ms. Mitchell said, “It has to start at the top. It has to start at the top because that’s where all the mistrust starts. I mean in the whole district it needs to come from the top...it needs to get to the teachers...and then it’ll get to the students if there’s a more loving, open environment.” Without this push from above, Ms. McWilliams did not believe teachers would deal with these issues in large part because of how controversial they were. “We don’t seek more conflict, when it isn’t immediate, pertinent, got to do it,” she said. “I mean who would? I mean without an external push like you coming and saying I’d like to do this...and people like me who say, ‘Oh, I could help you?’” In turn, teachers were observing the reality that in order to change the school, the leaders, who were investigated in Chapter 3, needed to be on board, as well. However, even without these structural changes, teachers were using their

own creativity to come up with innovative ways to be more effective for their students around issues of race, and students were efficaciously changing their behavior and interactions around race. Done at scale, these efforts have the potential to change the game of race in schools.

## **CHAPTER 8**

### **Conclusion On Doing Race in Schools: Why Does it Matter? What is the Risk?**

Schools, for many of us who spend time in them and write about them, remain places of hope—they offer the possibility of new realities. Focusing on schools encourages us to emphasize the becoming and the emerging—the inevitability that racial understandings and racial rules must all be learned, that race does not exist inert and separate from us, and thus that racial lessons might be learned differently. Examining schools challenges us not merely to document what is but to begin to imagine how it might be better.

-Amanda Lewis, *Race in the Schoolyard* p. 190

I write now with a sense that...we have missed a very important boat. We have given up the rich and meaningful education of our children in favor of narrower, decontextualized, meaningless procedures that leave unopened hearts, unformed character, and unchallenged minds....Seldom are students encouraged to tackle the deep moral issues they must tussle with in this complex time, nor are they led to think about themselves as agents responsible for a larger world....Were we focused on our children as inheritors of the future, perhaps we could be more deliberate in teaching them the traits they need to become protectors of the earth and all of its inhabitants.

-Lisa Delpit, *Other People's Children*

#### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The quotes that open this chapter speak to both the potential of schools to change the ways in which young people learn to make meaning of and interact across race, and the reality that far too often, schools work to maintain the social system as it is—one in which being black seems impossible to disentangle from being marginalized; one in which the racial biases that students come to school with, grown in families and communities that have struggled to overcome histories of racism, are left unchallenged and uninterrupted. In the current political climate, in which “education” is thought to be a synonym for standardized achievement, it is easy to overlook our failure to provide meaningful education for our children. When test scores, graduation rates, and college attendance are the focus, it can seem as though issues of race and relationships are merely a distraction from what is “really important.”

However, beyond the walls of school, life in the world is primarily about that which for far too long schools have not seen as their responsibility to address. It is about

working and building relationships with those who are different; it is about participating in a multicultural, pluralistic, democratic society that is dependent upon the abilities of those from diverse backgrounds to work toward a common goal; it is about allowing for disagreement, diverse experiences, and differing perspectives without seeing them as threats to the common good; and it is about learning to think critically about the world and take action to interrupt injustice. As it stands, schools deal little with these things that *really matter*. And on occasion, there are national reminders of the risks associated with this failure.

During the editing of this dissertation, Trayvon Martin, a 17-year old, African American boy, was killed in his own suburban community by George Zimmerman, a white Hispanic man who believed “he looked suspicious.” In the month before I submitted the final draft of my dissertation, this incident was at the forefront of my mind, not only because it was such a tragic event in which realities of racism were being made clear to the larger public, but also because in many ways it seemed so connected to the story I was writing. To my mind, the Trayvon Martin killing was an unspeakable example of what can happen when racial bias is reproduced. Most of the friends, family members, students, teachers, and academics I talked to about this incident were focused on the tragedy for the Martin Family. However, my mind was also on the tragedy of George Zimmerman. At this moment, the details of this case and of the life of Zimmerman have not been made public. In my mind, though, I have imagined a life and history for George Zimmerman. I imagine him as the grown up version of one of the many students I have worked with over the years. Perhaps like Matt, in 11<sup>th</sup> grade Zimmerman thought it was funny to jokingly accuse black men of being rapists. Perhaps like Danny he believed black people were “too sensitive” and needed to get over race. Perhaps like Bethany, he thought black people were loud, ghetto, and obnoxious. Perhaps like Ed, he had been convinced by TV that black people were dangerous and thought only about killing, even though they lived next door in large houses and came from “good” families. Perhaps like Salim, he had been the target of jokes himself because of his ethnic identity and had internalized them (Fanon, 1968) laughed them off as no big deal, and dished them right back at his black friends. Perhaps, like many students at Jefferson—and other schools in the country—he came from a family, community, and society in which there were “little

hits of racism” that over and over again reinforced the message that black is dangerous. And perhaps no teacher or adult had ever interrupted these exchanges. Perhaps, no one had ever taught him not to be racist.

And so on the morning of February 26, 2012, maybe George Zimmerman consciously thought: “I do not like black people. I think I will kill one.” But likely he did not. Rather, it was more likely that for some reason he could not put his finger on, something about Trayvon Martin made him nervous. It was more likely that the grand total of all of the things that he had been “taught” about black people came to a head on that night. All of the jokes he had told in his youth—and perhaps his adulthood—that had seemed so funny, were now shaping the lens through which he saw that young man walking down the street, carrying a bag of skittles, in the dark. The sum total of these life experiences made him fear the sight of this young man, made him pull out his gun and shoot him, and allowed him to claim that he did so in self-defense. While my heart aches for Trayvon Martin and his family, it also aches for the system that allowed the George Zimmerman of my imagination to exist. It is this system that school reform, as currently conceptualized, ignores.

## **II. FINDINGS AND PROMISES**

Local and national education reform efforts have given little attention to the daily interpersonal interactions around race that take place in our school. However, most schools are places in which racial hierarchies and biases are being reproduced, rather than interrupted. On the ground, race creates significant challenges for teachers who often struggle with students who are from different backgrounds than their own. In addition, students often interact with each other in ways that perpetuate discriminatory racial humor and reinforce negative perceptions of black youth. This dissertation explored how stakeholders at three levels of a somewhat unique school system were making sense of and interacting around race.

Jefferson High School was not unlike most integrated public schools in the country. It was a place where students from different racial backgrounds, who were coming to school carrying the race rules they had been taught at home, were collectively figuring out how to create a new racial reality, a new game of racial relationships and

interactions. It was a place where most of the educators—almost all of whom were white—were not prepared to help guide students as they constructed relationships across race.

Jefferson was also a unique community that was rapidly changing—perhaps in ways that many communities will in the next few decades (Pfeiffer, 2012). Between 1992 and 2009, the number of families of color in the area more than doubled as black families sought out the American dream. However, unlike many schools in the United States with similar levels of racial integration, at Jefferson students’ racial and class identities did not follow the expected trajectory. Instead, black and white students were just as likely to make over \$75,000 and black students were more likely to come from homes in which their parents had college degrees. As a result, arguments about the connections between black underachievement, marginalization, and lower-class positions could not be made in this place. Nonetheless, race remained a salient and contentious issue in the school—one that class could not eradicate. Rather, at Jefferson administrators, students, and teachers all worked in concert to reproduce racial hierarchies (A. E. Lewis, 2003).

### **A. Administrators**

Administrators worked to reproduce race relations by willfully ignoring it. They muted race discussions (Pollock, 2004) through a top-heavy power structure that created a culture of silence and fear; hiring and promotion policies that led to an almost all-white staff and silenced the voices of people of color in decision-making positions; and the failure to disseminate data about the ways in which race mediated achievement, disciplinary referrals, graduation rates, and free and reduced lunch status. Moreover, when previous administrators had attempted to raise these issues, some white staff used claims of reverse racism to suggest that race was only a problem when black people made it one. These efforts ultimately provided more validation for teachers’ claims that the struggles they faced were really about “class” and “culture,” not race (Bonilla-Silva, 2010), even in instances in which black students were not poor.

Unfortunately, administrators thought of themselves as merely “managing” issues of race, rather than contributing to them through their own silence and inaction. Because they rarely talked about race, Jefferson administrators struggled to provide spaces in

which students and teachers could think about these issues—even in the most celebratory ways (May & Sleeter, 2010). In the two years of this study there was no school-wide acknowledgement of Martin Luther King Day, Black History Month, Hispanic Heritage Month, or any other national holidays that acknowledge the contributions of people of color. If anything, when race was a factor, the school worked actively to silence it by asking questions like, “What else can we call it?” As a result, two years in a row the school allowed for students to “opt out” of watching President Barack Obama’s back-to-school speech and struggled to create and sustain a committee of teachers interested in issues of culture.

However, arguably the most significant administrative failure around issues of race was that willful ignorance created a culture in which it was not possible to address violent racial tensions between students. When a fight broke out due to the usage and misuse of racial slurs by students from different racial backgrounds, the school could only think to respond in ways that were punitive, reactive, and ultimately did not address the underlying racial bias. Because administrators were unwilling to deal with race proactively, Jefferson was ultimately a place in which students’ racial hostilities were reinforced.

## **B. Students**

Within this culture of silence and willful ignorance, students were engaging with each other in hyper-racialized ways in which students of color were verbally targeted and white students were physically intimidated, reinforcing notions of black inferiority among students.

Like most schools in the United States, students were racially segregated in cafeterias, afterschool activities, and hallways. Nonetheless, buying into the dominant narrative of racial progress, many of them thought of their school as a place where “everyone got along.” There was evidence to the contrary, though. Students often told racial jokes and used racial slurs that targeted students of color and framed them as ignorant, violent, and ghetto. While they claimed these interactions were humorous, just beneath the surface was another reality. Many students—black and white—admitted they believed black people were “bad,” “ghetto,” and “obnoxious”—despite the class positions

of these students. Moreover, many of the white students came from families that openly held racist ideologies, further challenging their explanation that their hyper-racial interactions were “just jokes.”

White students’ negative stereotypes about “blackness” were reinforced by the fact that some black students did intentionally intimidate their white peers in hallways. As a result, white and black students often bumped into and pushed one another purposefully. Nonetheless, the racial conventions of the school, and the belief that black students were “naturally” better fighters—another stereotype that went unchallenged—usually kept these interactions from becoming violent, although as the introduction revealed, not always. It was clear that despite students’ claims that racism was a thing of the past, most of the students at Jefferson thought and talked about it frequently—often in ways that served only to validate the negative and hegemonic beliefs they already held.

### **C. Teachers**

Unfortunately, teachers did not provide students with opportunities to challenge their biases or learn to engage race in a way that was anything other than “joking.” Teachers did not intervene in hyper-racial student interactions, nor did they engage students in discussions about race in their classrooms (Banks, 2007; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Instead, they enacted colorblind frames to ignore the racial tensions happening among students (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). They also turned a blind eye to their own hyper-racial student interactions. While they, like students, claimed that race was not a major issue in the school, they were caught in a cycle in which many students overtly accused them of being racist. Like racial humor among students, these accusations were often couched as jokes. And like student interactions, just below the surface was the reality that many teachers did hold racial biases and many students—especially black students—believed teachers negatively judged black students based on race (Dance, 2002; A. A. Ferguson, 2000). Nonetheless, all teachers—even those who thought of themselves as “color-conscious”—bought into the larger culture of silence, choosing to ignore and overlook the realities of race and racism in their school.

Although administrators, teachers, and students all espoused beliefs that Jefferson was not dealing with racial tensions, closer investigation of the interactions and

ideologies of all three groups told a different story. Administrators were struggling to create a multicultural school and to effectively respond to interracial fights; students were interacting with each other in hyper-racialized ways that perpetuated discrimination and bias and hindered their abilities to form meaningful relationships across difference; and teachers struggled with how they should think about and talk about race and how they should respond to problematic student interactions across race, when virtually nothing in their educational training or professional development had prepared them to do so. The fact that white and black students came from similar class backgrounds did not seem to lessen these tensions. In short, Jefferson High School—like most high schools in the country—was struggling with issues of race at every level of the system.

#### **D. Dialogue**

There is some hope for interrupting cycles of racial reproduction in schools. Though outside the box of current conceptualizations of education reform, social justice multicultural (Banks, 2007), and dialogic (Zúñiga, 2007) approaches to education, rooted in theories of critical pedagogy (Freire, 2000; Giroux & Robbins, 2006) have some promise of effectively addressing issues of race, relationships and injustice in schools. These models encourage adults to proactively discuss and incorporate race into their teaching, rather than ignore and avoid it. Unfortunately, the focus on accountability and standardized test measures has left little room for most public schools to think about how to incorporate these approaches. Because reform efforts have given little thought to the relational elements of schooling and to the ways in which social injustice happens at the hands of individuals, most adults do not feel they have the knowledge or skills to effectively address issues of race.

The final chapter of this dissertation offered one model of how schools can create spaces in which students are provided with opportunities to talk about race, and in which teachers develop the confidence and competence to facilitate these conversations by “talking race” amongst themselves. It piloted a student dialogue program and a teacher professional development workshop in which students and teachers had structured and facilitated conversations about race. While these two efforts were not done on a scale large enough to change the culture of the school, the experiences of participants

suggested that, under the right circumstances, talking about race can have a positive impact on school racial culture. Students said their experience encouraged them to think more critically about issues of race, change their own behavior around race, and interrupt racial bullying among peers. Similarly, teachers gained confidence in talking about race, became more aware of how race mattered within the school, and were more likely to take action to interrupt racial bullying and proactively incorporate opportunities for students to think and talk about race into their curriculum.

However, arguably what was most interesting about this intervention was that the shell of racial reproduction was not all that hard to crack. By simply creating some structure, and providing a space for dialogue, students and teachers were able to reconsider what they thought about race rather easily. Moreover, they were excited about doing so. Talking race felt *good*—even if there were many moments of frustration, tension, and misunderstanding. It felt valuable. It felt cathartic. They wanted to do it more. While the positive experiences of students and teachers was in part the result of my relationship with them and, perhaps, my experience doing this work, I think it is actually a reflection of the fact that people in schools *want* to talk about race. People in the world want to talk about it. Therefore, the issue is often not one of interest or desire, but rather one of fear and trepidation. If these concerns can be put aside, even for an hour, talking about race can have transformative power.

Nonetheless, while the shell of racial reproduction is easy to crack, it is very difficult to break. The pull in the direction of silence, avoidance, and denial is strong. As Hailey put it, “That’s why I think Intergroup should keep going, because like it’s like school, you know, you forget about it if you don’t do it for so often, and if you did it every year then eventually it would just become natural for you.” Beyond the walls of classrooms with blue chairs arranged in a circle, there is significant pressure to act as though race is not an issue, or is only one with regard to quantitative data. There is significant pressure to ignore the everyday “hits of racism” that maintain our social system as it is. In turn, despite the individual level success of my work at Jefferson, in order to interrupt racial reproduction in schools, efforts of this sort need to be led by upper-level administrators and done in ways that touch larger numbers of students and teachers.

### **III. NEXT STEPS AND THE LIMITS OF THE POLITICAL CLIMATE**

The year after the research for this project concluded, a new superintendent was hired in the Jefferson District. I was invited to meet with her to discuss the findings of my research and the work I had done in the community. When I walked in the room she introduced herself and immediately got down to business. “So what’s going on with race in my district,” she asked? In comparison to the last superintendent who had effectively silenced race, her tone clearly suggested that she had the potential to be a different kind of race leader.

After talking for two hours, she said she hoped the district could come up with ways to continue proactively addressing race in the future. She said, “This is important work. We need to deal with these things. How can we make this happen?” Feeling rather bold, I responded, “You’re the superintendent. If you can’t make it happen, I don’t know who can.” Within a few months she had scheduled a meeting for me to present some of my findings to the school board and had volunteered to send two of the Jefferson administrators to participate in a countywide training on race that, ironically, I was facilitating. Jefferson was moving in the direction of considering how they might address race in more proactive ways. Under a new administration, they were taking concrete and admirable steps to address what, for decades, they had actively worked to ignore.

Whether or not these initiatives will lead to sustained change remains unclear. The reality of school reform is that our education system is on the fast track down a path in which initiatives of this kind have little traction—even when advocated by superintendents. This does not mean that addressing race more fully is not possible. In fact, there are a number of counties in the state and country in which district leaders have made race a priority and have seen significant changes in their teachers and students. However, what was clear in the superintendent’s question to me was that despite her position, in many ways she felt as powerless as teachers when it came to race. Although she could call a meeting with the school board, she could not mandate that they do something in response to what they heard. The time I spent in Jefferson illuminated both the importance and limitations of school leaders in changing racial culture. Unfortunately, even when leaders are supportive of efforts to address race, the ways in which schools are more broadly structured often interrupts these efforts. The recent

repeal of Arizona's Ethnic Studies courses is an unfortunate example (Lacey, 2011; Winerip, 2012). As a result, broader initiatives will likely be needed at the state and federal levels to make sustained change.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

I opened this chapter by asking what the “risk” is of doing race in schools. While some may have interpreted my question as a suggestion that talking about race is a “risky” and uncomfortable endeavor for the individuals involved, I believe the real risk is in *not* talking about it. When we do not talk about race, when we ignore it, when we fail to interrupt racial discrimination and to incorporate diverse perspectives in our curriculum and pedagogical approaches, we are teaching young people that the hierarchical structure of race relations and racial inequality is acceptable. We are telling them we sanction educational systems that only value and successfully educate students from certain racial groups. We are teaching them that the “status quo” is not a problem. However, as the experiences of teachers and students at Jefferson have revealed, we are contending with many problems around race in our schools and in our country. If we fail to use our educational system to interrupt these cycles, to teach students *not* to be racist, rather than assuming they won't be if we just ignore race, the “little hits of racism” will continue to have a big social impact.

## APPENDIX

Table 9.1 YEAR OF HOUSING CONSTRUCTION BY DISTRICT

	JEFFERSON DISTRICT		MAJOR CITY DISTRICT	COLLEGE TOWN DISTRICT	STATE
Total Housing Units	11,564	11,564	404,496	69,176	4,522,600
Built 2005 or later	307	2.70%	0.5%	1.6%	1.7%
Built 2000 to 2004	2,190	18.90%	1.1%	7.2%	7.0%
Built 1990 to 1999	3,217	27.80%	1.9%	16.2%	12.8%
Built 1980 to 1989	1,546	13.40%	2.2%	13.0%	9.9%
Built 1970 to 1979	2,155	18.60%	3.6%	17.7%	15.7%
Built 1960 to 1969	783	6.80%	6.7%	16.7%	12.1%
Built 1950 to 1959	470	4.10%	21.9%	11.2%	15.6%
Built 1940 to 1949	313	2.70%	26.4%	4.7%	8.7%
Built 1939 or earlier	583	5.00%	35.7%	11.7%	16.6%

2005-2009 American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates

Table 9.2 OCCUPIED HOUSING BY YEAR  
JEFFERSON SCHOOL DISTRICT

Total Occupied Housing Units	10,854	10,854
Moved in 2005 or later	2,346	21.60%
Moved in 2000 to 2004	4,113	37.90%
Moved in 1990 to 1999	2,863	26.40%
Moved in 1980 to 1989	819	7.50%
Moved in 1970 to 1979	374	3.40%
Moved in 1969 or earlier	339	3.10%

2005-2009 American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates

Table 9.3 HOME PRICES BY DISTRICT

	JEFFERSON DISTRICT		MAJOR CITY DISTRICT	COLLEGE TOWN DISTRICT	STATE
Total Owner Occupied Units	9,369	9,369	176,176	33,158	2,879,917
Less than \$50,000	1,565	16.70%	18.3%	5.7%	8.8%
\$50,000 to \$99,999	541	5.80%	46.4%	4.0%	19.0%
\$100,000 to \$149,000	790	8.40%	22.4%	6.5%	23.4%
\$150,000 to \$199,999	2,394	25.60%	7.2%	13.4%	19.6%
\$200,000 to \$299,999	2,924	31.20%	3.8%	30.5%	16.7%
\$300,000 to \$499,999	1,080	11.50%	1.3%	27.1%	9.2%
\$500,000 to \$999,999	41	0.40%	0.40%	11.3%	2.8%
\$1,000,000 or more	34	0.40%	0.20%	1.4%	0.6%
Median Home Value	\$187,400		\$85,200	\$256,700	\$147,500

2005-2009 American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates

**Table 9.4 EMPLOYMENT BY OCCUPATION  
JEFFERSON SCHOOL DISTRICT**

Total civilian employed population 16 years and over	14,136	14,136
Management, professional and related occupations	5,387	38.10%
Service Occupations	2,323	16.40%
Sales and Office Occupations	3,104	22%
Farming, fishing, forestry	0	0%
Construction, extraction, maintenance, repair	1,485	10.50%
Production, transportation, material moving	1,837	13%

2005-2009 American Community Survey, 3-Year Estimate

**Table 9.5 EMPLOYMENT BY INDUSTRY  
JEFFERSON SCHOOL DISTRICT**

Total civilian employed population 16 years and over	14,136	14,136
Agriculture, forestry, fishing, hunting, mining	42	0.30%
Construction	1,077	7.60%
Manufacturing	2,164	15.30%
Wholesale Trade	343	2.40%
Retail Trade	1,448	10.20%
Transportation, Warehousing, Utilities	1,035	7.30%
Information	362	2.60%
Finance, Insurance, Real Estate	705	5%
Professional, Scientific, Management, Administrative	1,201	8.50%
Educational Services, Health Care, Social Assistance	3,523	24.90%
Arts, Entertainment, Recreation, Food Services	885	6.30%
Other Services	671	4.70%
Public Administration	680	4.80%

2005-2009 American Community Survey, 3-Year Estimate

**Table 9.6 EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF POPULATION OVER 25  
BY DISTRICT**

	JEFFERSON DISTRICT		MAJOR CITY DISTRICT	COLLEGE TOWN DISTRICT	STATE
Population 25 Years and Over	18,539	18,539	567,500	87,917	6,611,617
Less than 9th grade	329	1.80%	7.0%	1.40%	3.7%
9 <sup>th</sup> to 12th grade, no diploma	1,561	8.40%	16.9%	2.70%	8.9%
High school graduate or equivalent	4,320	23.3%	34.4%	10.3%	31.8%
Some college, no degree	5,019	27.10%	23.6%	13.3%	23.1%
Associate's degree	1,396	7.50%	6.1%	5.3%	8.0%
Bachelor's degree	3,676	19.80%	7.5%	27.5%	15.2%
Graduate or professional degree	2,238	12.10%	4.7%	39.4%	9.3%
Percent high school graduate or higher		89.80%	76.2%	95.9%	87.4%
Percent bachelor's degree or higher		31.90%	12.1%	67%	24.5%

2005-2009 American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates

**Table 9.7 RATES OF POVERTY BY RACE  
JEFFERSON SCHOOL DISTRICT**

	White	Black
Percent of total families living in poverty	25%	73.5%
Percent of families living in poverty by race	10%	6.7%
0-14 year olds living in poverty	23%	14%
15-17 year olds living in poverty	11%	12%

2005-2009 American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates

**Table 9.8 JEFFERSON COMMUNITY POPULATION BY RACE AND AGE**

	Total Pop	Under 5 years	5 to 9 years	10 to 14 years	15 to 17 years	18 to 24 years	25 to 54 years	55 to 74 years	Over 75
Black	4,894	7.9%	12.9%	9.05%	6.59%	8.04%	38.8%	15.12%	1.5%
White	22,878	8.9%	6.8%	6.8%	4.3%	8.10%	45.5%	15.4%	3.2%

2005-2009 American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates

**Table 9.9 POPULATION BY RACE AND DISTRICT**

	Jefferson	Major City	Major College Town
Total Population	29,502	916,133	163,198
Black or African American	16.40%	76.80%	7.60%
White	75.90%	12.80%	71.20%
American Indian/Alaska Native	0.40%	0.20%	0.20%
Asian	1.80%	1.50%	14.00%
Hispanic/Latino (any race)	2.80%	7.10%	3.60%
Two or more races	2.40%	1.30%	2.90%

2005-2009 American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates

Table 9.10 STATE MERIT EXAM BY SUBGROUP  
GRADE 11, SPRING 2009

SUBJECT	MEETS/EXCEEDS STANDARDS	DOESN'T MEET STANDARDS	TOTAL STUDENTS TESTED	%
<b>English</b>			296	
Black	39%	61%	99	33.4%
White	55%	45%	181	61%
Male	46%	54%	142	47.9%
Female	54%	46%	154	52%
Economically Disadvantaged	35%	65%	69	23.3%
<b>Math</b>			296	
Black	31%	69%	99	33.4%
White	49%	51%	181	61%
Male	51%	49%	142	47.9%
Female	36%	64%	154	52%
Economically Disadvantaged	23%	77%	69	23.3%
<b>Reading</b>			296	
Black	53%	47%	99	33.4%
White	64%	36%	181	61%
Male	56%	44%	142	47.9%
Female	64%	36%	154	52%
Economically Disadvantaged	49%	51%	69	23.3%
<b>Science</b>			297	
Black	45%	55%	99	33.3%
White	59%	41%	182	61.2%
Male	59%	41%	143	48.1%
Female	51%	49%	154	51.8%
Economically Disadvantaged	32%	68%	69	23.2%
<b>Writing</b>			296	
Black	33%	67%	99	33.4%
White	46%	54%	181	61%
Male	34%	66%	142	47.9%
Female	49%	51%	154	52%
Economically Disadvantaged	32%	68%	69	23.3%
<b>Social Studies</b>			297	
Black	73%	27%	99	33.3%
White	82%	18%	182	61.2%
Male	83%	17%	143	48.1%
Female	77%	23%	154	51.8%
Economically Disadvantaged	72%	28%	69	23.2%

State Department of Education

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